

Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* and the Birth of the Political*

Eli Park Sorensen

Department of English
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
3/F Fung King Hey Bldg, Shatin, NT, Hong Kong
Email: eliparks@cuhk.edu.hk

Marvin Lee

Visual Communication Design
Hongik University
Hongmungwan r712
Wausan-ro 94, Mapo gu, Seoul 04066, South Korea
Email: gmarvinlee@gmail.com

Abstract:

This article looks at one of the most popular recent installation works, Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, which still is probably the Danish-Icelandic artist's most famous work. To explain both the iconicity within Eliasson's oeuvre and the enormous popularity of the work, we argue that it essentially addresses an aesthetic conflict between a critical *and* a populist potential; or, more specifically—reformulates this conflict. For what seems to be clear is that although the critical dimension is explicitly present in the work, it is largely insignificant in terms of the overall aesthetic experience. What we find, then, is a work whose aesthetics in many ways attempts to distance itself from late 20th century predecessors by blatantly surrendering to a seductive spectacle that suspends the critical. In doing so, *The Weather Project* points towards a new political paradigm emerging around the beginning of the 21st century, which in more recent years seems to have found a temporary culmination through events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president. The post-9/11 political paradigm moved away from an idea prevalent during the late 20th century, embodied in Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history and the concomitant idea of the absolutely secure world (and, by implication, the erasure of the outside/inside distinction). After an ill-defined war on terror that undoubtedly has made the world less secure, financial crises that have made the gap between rich and poor wider, the rise of populism amidst even the most solid and oldest democratic institutions, and more generally a widening gap between 'the people' and 'the elite'—it is as if we have returned to political antagonisms that many thought were no longer relevant. We argue that it is within this context that one may appreciate *The Weather Project's* intervention as an art work recreating an atmosphere, a mood, that reminds us of a collective body the binding of which is essentially a pre-political moment—a moment at which we may, yet again, ask the forgotten question: why we need the political at all.

Keywords: Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, installation, critical dimension, aesthetic seduction, the political, the state of nature

* **Acknowledgement:** This work was supported by the 2018 Hongik University Research Fund.

Introduction

In the autumn of 2019, Tate Modern ran a special exhibition called *In Real Life* with the works of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson.¹ This came in the wake of the 2018 Tate Modern exhibition *Ice Watch*, which consisted of 30 blocks of ice that the artist had carved out of the waters around Greenland.² There is no doubt that Eliasson currently belongs among the world's elite of contemporary artists—a fame that dates back to the breakthrough exhibition, also at Tate Modern, *The Weather Project*, one of the largest and most popular recent art successes, attracting some 2.2 million spectators.

This article takes a closer look at *The Weather Project* as a work that in many ways seems to contain an *essence* of Eliasson's oeuvre and style as a whole, which furthermore represents perhaps one of the most spectacular and popular works of art on a global scale in recent times.³ These two points—the essence and the popularity—raise some crucial issues in and around the work that directly connects it to what could be seen as an aesthetic conflict between a critical potential and a populist appeal in the post-9/11 age. When the work was first exhibited—in 2003—the world had both literally and figuratively taken its first feeble steps into the 21st century; moving away from the liberal 90s, the end of history as a consequence of the end of the Cold War, Labour's third way, postmodernism, the optimism over the blessings of globalization and multiculturalism—and towards a new world order that consisted of a protracted and never clearly defined post-9/11 war on terror; a gradually intensifying populism, which in liberal democracies seems to have reached a tentative culmination in the form of Donald Trump and Brexit; and finally, an increasingly irreconcilable polarization between the 'elite' and the 'people' on a global scale (which, of course, was further polarized after the 2008 financial crisis).⁴ That is, in many ways a return to political antagonisms that many in Western democracies thought had been fully resolved by the end of the 20th century. In 2003, it was still possible to believe that these emerging trends were merely *exceptions* or digressions in relation to the normative paradigm of the end of history; nowadays one would be tempted to say that these exceptions in fact constituted the *norm*, a normative reality that the liberal West—momentarily, during a few happy and self-absorbed decades—had largely forgotten. Today, what used to be core principles of liberal societies—e.g., democracy, tolerance, transatlantic collaborations, international treaties, mobility—are increasingly seen as naive at best; dangerous and threatening at worst.⁵

This ominous political horizon seems to stand in stark contrast to the serene calm and tranquility one finds in Eliasson's *The Weather Project*. Yet there is a sense in which the tension one finds aesthetically articulated in an early millennial work such as *The Weather Project*—an oscillation between the work's playful, critical dimension enveloped by an overwhelming, breathtakingly beautiful simplicity that suspends the critical dimension—is precisely a *political* tension, or one that pertains to the political. While the critical dimension is quite explicitly present in the work—something that art critics have been particularly eager to point out ever since it was first exhibited—it would hardly be credible to claim that this aspect was the main reason millions

of people went to visit the exhibition. On the contrary, the most notable thing about this spectacular work seemed on the contrary to be its *populist* appeal, the fact that it managed to tap into a vast source of collective fascination. And is it not precisely here that we find the resurgence of an old aesthetic problem that the 20th century never managed to solve in any convincing way? That under all the critical self-distance, laughter, satire, parody, ambiguity and irony of postmodernism—as the ultimate aesthetic expression of late 20th century democratic sentiments⁶—the longing for the archaic mass psychology of the collective body emerged ever so steadily again; first as art, and then—a few years later, in the form of worldwide crises, populist risings, protests—as reality itself. In this article, we will try to explore some of the reasons as to why so many people were—and still are—drawn to this particular work, discussing both its critical dimension as well as its mass appeal, arguing that there is a haunting *antagonism* at the heart of *The Weather Project*, which far from being sorted out points us in the direction of an old political problem that may temporarily have been forgotten, but was never really resolved; the specter of the state of nature. Thus, our overall argument is that the work constitutes an important millennial aesthetic statement capturing the gist of a truly 21st century spirit of the political. Or rather: the re-evocation of an essentially *pre-political* moment that raises the forgotten question why we ever needed the political in the first place.

The Installation Work

Eliasson's *The Weather Project* was first exhibited in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2003.⁷ The work consisted of approximately 200 low-sodium mono-frequency lamps that were attached to a huge translucent screen, creating a visual spectacle resembling a gigantic solar disk. The huge ceiling was covered with large mirrors plates, which made the already huge room seem even bigger.⁸ Although the solar disk *looked* round (i.e., resembling the sun), it was in fact only a half-circle, but which was visually doubled due to the mirror effects. Other special effects were added to this great illusion, such as humidifiers that released sugar water into the air, creating a thin fog around the disk. Taken together, this enormous construction created a distinct, almost supernatural radiance.

There is something sensational in itself that a modern installation can attract over 2 million spectators; something that undoubtedly indicates that the work struck something deep in the wider popular imagination, and not just among experienced art connoisseurs.⁹ To describe the aesthetic experience of *The Weather Project*, the closest might be to envision it as a kind of hypnotic, overwhelming feeling of grandeur that engulfs the spectator. In this sense, the work inscribes itself in a long aesthetic tradition of works of art striving to articulate the sublime, often in the form of nature's enormity, e.g., as in Turner's fierce yet fragile landscapes, or the awe-inspiring visions of John Martin's or Francis Danby's works.¹⁰ One of the reasons why the installation had such a mass appeal was perhaps due to the fact that in spite of its spectacular appearance, this work was to a lesser extent about itself, and more about the audience. Via the huge sun disk and the endless mirror images of the ceiling, it was a work that literally let people mirror themselves.¹¹ The sense of

enormity was undoubtedly magnified by the insertion of a well-known, gigantic phenomenon of the natural (a sunset) into an artificial space, which thus framed or enclosed this enormity—despite the enormous size of the Turbine Hall.¹²

It is not hard to imagine that it was precisely this unique framework that caused the installation work to directly influence the behavior of the crowd: people literally lay down, sunbathed, relaxed—as if they were sprawling on a lawn in a public park on a warm summer evening.¹³ This very direct, almost tactile, relationship between the work and the spectator is something that several critics have pointed out, not only in relation to *The Weather Project*, but as a more general feature of Eliasson's oeuvre. Thus Frichot writes that Eliasson's works create “new models of social interaction” (33), while Madeleine Grynsztejn believes that the works more generally have a progressive-ideological dimension that calls the spectator into action.¹⁴ Whether this latter issue is actually the case or simply a critical fiction is something we will return to in a moment, but at least it seems beyond any doubt that Eliasson's works, and *The Weather Project* specifically, affect the viewer's behavior.

The Weather Project is arguably one of the most spectacular installation works ever. As some critics have pointed out, installation art as a genre engages precisely with the dimensions of reality in new forms, relationships and potentials.¹⁵ Quite literally, it opens up the discursive concept of reality again, and puts it together in new ways. In this sense, the genre operates with a concept of realism that is significantly different from the subversive-abstract aesthetics of modernism and the avant-garde, albeit with a less intense focus on the representational dimension as such, i.e., the work as a mimetic illusion. Instead, we find an acute sensory focus on the viewer's experience of the *materialities* of reality itself, their organizational and categorical principles—and thus a focus on boundaries, limits and transitions. Because the installation work typically has no boundaries other than the arbitrary boundaries set by the walls of the museum—which, due to the work's expansiveness, was particularly true of Eliasson's *The Weather Project*—we are, so to speak, entering a zone of indistinction whose purpose is precisely to problematize the normative space along with all the implications of this space.

As an ambiguous site that does not acknowledge fixed, immanent and absolute boundaries or limitations, the installation work as a genre carries out a performative gesture that unfolds in the cracks between different spheres and states, physical as well as mental. Thus, one could say that the installation work as a genre *activates* otherwise dormant spaces and contexts, in the very concrete sense that it creates new constellations, forms and territorial boundaries: for example, Tate Modern's Turbine Hall suddenly transformed by an enormous, artificial sun. Precisely because of this work of activating spaces and contexts, the installation has a material 'situatedness' in that it cannot be easily moved—at least not without significantly altering the aesthetic experience. The uniqueness of the work, its 'aura' so to speak, is inevitably tied to the arbitrary restrictions of the site. Above all, the installation activates a tactile-sensory relationship between the viewer's body-dependent (and subjectively conditioned) experience of place and time through the interaction with the

materiality of the work. Due to its direct engagement with real space and a variety of materialities (often occurring by way of a transgression of the work's 'natural' frames, thus potentially involving a radical *inclusion* of the viewer), the installation work explores the immanent boundaries between different layers, spheres, states that together constitute modern existence.

The Critical-Ironic Dimension

Thus, it would seem relatively straightforward to develop the argument that the installation as a genre represents one of the most radical aesthetic attempts to articulate the problem regarding outside/inside—precisely because the installation does not naturally recognize any natural frames (e.g. the limits of physical space or the conventional boundaries of an art work), thus implicitly questioning any distinction between outside and inside, and in a further sense 'defamiliarizing' this distinction by potentially including the audience.

Among critics and scholars, there seems to be a broad consensus that precisely *The Weather Project*—and, more generally, Eliasson's many diverse installation works—possesses a 'work-immanent' critical potential, which among other things involves a renewed engagement with the material organization of reality that has a direct effect on the viewer's behavior. Johnson thus observes in connection with Eliasson's oeuvre that "installation art has been critically recognized as a form apparently more resistant to Benjaminian issues of reproduction, and thus, apparently also resistant to commodification" (325). Spiegl pursues this argument further by claiming that

Beauty, theatricality, drama, non-trueness, nature, and the nature of the non-true are the parameters around which Eliasson groups his works. They are deconstructivists to the extent that they always lay bare the principles behind the construction of their 'appearance'. They are not only theatrical in their effects, but also in their awareness of the fact that these are only effects. What appears to be nature—be it a rainbow, a waterfall, a sunrise, or whatever—is always and clearly marked as a natural 'effect'. (100)

Thus, continues Spiegl, also with reference to Walter Benjamin, Eliasson's works constitute "a plea for illusion, for a knowing self-deception, or rather for a politics of the imaginary ... If there is such a thing as an aura of the false, then that would make Eliasson the first exponent of the work of art in the age of the nature of mechanical reproducibility" (102).

One does not have to look long to find this 'plea for illusion' which is at the same time a 'knowing self-deception'. Like many other Eliasson works, there was a clear and explicit dimension of critical disenchantment built into *The Weather Project*. The construction of the giant solar disk itself was by no means hidden; on the contrary, the electric lights and mirrors were clearly visible. A walkway behind the solar disk even prompted the audience to literally look behind the spectacle—like in a giant theatre, that is, except that in the theatre one cannot typically go behind the staged tableaux. This was precisely possible in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, a possibility presented to the audience almost like an invitation; as if the work insisted on not being experienced simply as a seductive spectacle.

The work recreates a unique situation—a natural phenomenon that is spectacularly reproduced in an indoor space, but which at the same time constitutes an instantly recognizable everyday phenomenon: we have seen the sunset (or sunrise) thousands of times, perhaps to the extent that we are no longer capable of experiencing it properly, in its pristine immediacy, directness. In this sense, Eliasson's work can almost be construed as a *citation* whose 'citability'—i.e., the awareness that the work imitates or reproduces the semiotic codes most often associated with an everyday phenomenon—is present side by side with the sublime experience of the work. Or maybe it would be more accurate to describe the work as a kind of arrested *snapshot* of an everyday experience that reminds us both of the countless sunsets we ourselves have experienced, and those we have seen in movies or on postcards; a moment of 'irreality', a liminal experience of the real and the non-real becoming irretrievably blurred. As an 'arrested snapshot' of the sun—a citation—the work simultaneously creates a new temporal dimension. Whereas sunsets typically last a few minutes, *The Weather Project* allows for a lingering, iterative experience that in real life would have been impossible.

In this sense, the critical dimension of *The Weather Project* touches upon the problem Paul de Man outlined in his discussion of allegory.¹⁶ Basically, de Man's argument is that whereas the figure of the 'symbol' articulates an inauthentic experience—more specifically a false postulate of unity between reality and fiction—the allegory offers a form of negative authenticity, namely the authentic recognition that immediate and direct authenticity is impossible. Indeed, the allegory postulates nothing but the fact that it is a belated successor of something else; that it refers to an earlier sign; and that its meaning depends on this reference to an earlier sign. More specifically, the principal dynamic of allegory communicates that signs do not refer to the world, to something outside of signs, but only to other signs.

When the allegoricity of a work involuntarily becomes too explicit, it turns into a cliché, i.e., a sign whose 'sign-ness' cancels the work's mimetic function. The cliché is a sign suffering from fatigue, a sign that has been overused, and whose meaning thus seems jammed, dead-like. The cliché prevents us from overlooking the illusoriness of the illusion (e.g., that the experience of a sunset actually reminds us of the experience of a movie that showed a sunset), and thus perhaps even reminds us of the unpleasant experience of discovering that one's intimate language is in fact someone else's. Ultimately, the cliché reminds us that we are trapped in a sign world, speaking words others have already used, and hence a sign world without the possibility of authentic experience.

But the allegory can also go the other way; it can move in the direction of irony by which the sign explicitly and self-consciously (and often with great confidence and energy) plays with the allegoricity of signs. What irony basically does is to carve out a new field of possibilities in which we are not only made aware of the linguistic constructs of the world, but precisely the critical opportunities that such a discovery engenders. Finally, according to de Man, there is a third possibility where we slip from the playful irony into a form of madness, i.e., the stage where the irony escalates to a point where one can no longer find one's way back, and hence no longer be able to discern the difference between the real and the fictitious—like the madness of the errant knight Don Quixote.

Given the critically disenchanting dimension of Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, an obvious approach to the work would be to highlight its allegorical dimension; not at first as a cliché (though the possibility does exist, e.g., to experience the work as an enlarged 'postcard'), but rather as an ironic work that precisely insists on exploring the boundary between the artificially reproducible and the real. In addition to this immanent work-critical dimension in *The Weather Project*, Eliasson's installation also contained a meta-critical dimension. In the exhibition catalogue, Eliasson presented a small study that preceded the work: it was a questionnaire addressed to the museum staff about how much light they each had access to.¹⁷ In doing so, Eliasson critically mapped out a 'daylight hierarchy' which apparently revealed that the more you earn, i.e., the higher in the staff hierarchy one was placed, the more access to daylight one had. The lowest-earning and thus the lowest-ranking workers had the least access to daylight, and poorest views from the museum to the outside surroundings.

The Weather Project thus balances, on the one hand, between a seductive, sublime aesthetic that overwhelms and affects the viewer, thus stunning the latter's critical senses; on the other hand, the work is very explicitly committed to refusing the viewer to lose him- or herself in the unique atmosphere of the work.

The Suspension of the Critical Work

And yet, perhaps the above section would not be an entirely correct description of *The Weather Project*—for the balance between the critical and the non-critical dimensions is simply not there in the work. Very little indicates that the millions of visitors were particularly interested in the work's critical dimension, not to mention the thought-provoking meta-critical institutional criticism, which likewise was largely ignored by reviewers and critics.

Perhaps more relevant here is simply to point out that the intention behind the critical dimension, both the work-critical aspects and the meta-criticism in the form of the study in the exhibition catalogue—which, if we follow some of the art-critical comments that the work generated, form a kind of resistance to the work's otherwise seductive spectacle, thus allegedly preventing people from indulging in an uncritical collective ecstasy—blatantly seemed to have misfired. Or perhaps it would be more correct to point out that, although the critical distancing effect was clearly present in the work, the sensory-seductive dimension of the work was so powerful that it cancelled out the former.

Thus, we have a work that contains an explicitly critical dimension, which, however, is overlooked and ignored by the audience—because the very mimetic-sensory-seductive dimension of the work itself seems so overwhelming, deafening; and of course—given the enormous audience numbers—because people were evidently *receptive* to this particular dimension. How to understand this relationship? We suggest that it is precisely this issue that constitutes one of the most interesting *aesthetic* aspects of Eliasson's millennial work; that is to say, because *The Weather Project*—unlike many millennial works of the 1990s—precisely here articulated a new *Zeitgeist*, according to which

the critical, self-distancing dimension simply meant very little, if anything at all. It is perhaps in this light that we must understand why some critics—a minority, to be sure—have explicitly distanced themselves from Eliasson's works; i.e., precisely because we no longer seem to be able to clearly discern and identify the work's critical dimension. Or perhaps because we can no longer hide or legitimize our fascination by simply referring to the critical dimension of the work. Thus, some critics have described Olafur Eliasson as an artist who creates a kind of science experiment or an entertaining spectacle that does not differ significantly from a theme park, merely inserted into an art institutional framework.¹⁸ Others have questioned Eliasson's alleged, progressive aesthetic agenda, labelling his work nostalgic and regressive. Or rather: an artist creating a cynical-illusory show whose main purpose (or at least effect) is to conjure up a reality-escaping dream of an impossible experience.

It might be slightly too harsh to compare Eliasson's *The Weather Project* with a theme park event, but the fact is that the work has an unusual effect that threatens not only to suspend or drown out the disenchanting, critical sense, but rather at a more fundamental level to question whether this work can be described as an art work at all.

Absolute Peace

Paul de Man's reflections on allegory are important as a critical problematization of the aesthetic illusion of the concept of reality. However, as mentioned, it is difficult to make a credible argument about the critical dimension in *The Weather Project*; it is demonstratively present, though the installation is evidently quite far from being in the same category as the ironic tongue-in-cheek works of e.g., Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst.

Taking the huge audience into consideration, it would seem be far more meaningful to situate the work's powers of fascination in closer proximity of de Man's form of madness, i.e., a point where irony spills into its opposite—a form of extreme authenticity, a performance of exaggerated sincerity gone too far, or perhaps a sublime experience of radical inclusion: the absolute abolition of distances, boundaries, separations. Madness is a form of intrusion into the concept of reality, something that throws us almost traumatically into a situation in which there are no longer any fixed coordinates, parameters; a zone of indistinction.¹⁹ This dissolution—bordering to or transgressing into madness—of everything solid is at the same time a condition that brings us back to a *pre-political* moment, not only in the sense that the work seems deliberately devoid of concrete political content, but rather in the sense that the work touches upon something essential—essential coordinates—regarding the very question as to why we in general need the political in the first place. The political here basically means the individual need to identify or formulate a relationship with a particular community providing protection, and the essentials of survival not only in a biological sense but also in terms of identity and recognition; and vice versa to identify what relationships constitute a threat to that community's continued existence.²⁰

In an atmosphere that appears absolutely peaceful, harmonious and meditative, and

where all human relations seem to merge into a higher unity, one might be tempted to draw the conclusion that *The Weather Project* ultimately articulates a utopian space in which the problem of the political has been eradicated once and for all: the absolutely depoliticized space.²¹ There are no Schmittian enemies here, only friends; Eliasson creates a work in an age articulating the idea of a global-universal space that has completely eliminated the lawless spaces on Earth, e.g., the forest or bog, and displaced or hunted down the figures of lawlessness to the extent that these are nowhere to be seen any longer. As Fukuyama and others would have argued, it was this epochal vision of the end of history that dominated the global imagination during the late 20th century. In such a world, where all territories are now secure, brought within the realm of law, there is nothing outside, or rather the *idea* of an ‘outside’ no longer makes sense. Thus, vice versa, it makes no sense to talk about an inside—there are no walls adjoining barbarism—for everything has now become legalized, peaceful. The only deviation to this absolute peace is precisely the exception; the terrorist, the criminal, the partisan, the ghetto, the camp, the exempt area surrounded by completely secured areas—but which nonetheless still operates *within* these secured areas.²²

However, it is precisely in the time after 9/11—and the specters derived in the form of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib—that this worldview has been greatly challenged. Alliez and Negri have written a small essay in conjunction with some reflections on contemporary art, where they make the rather lofty point that in the post-9/11 era, it no longer makes sense to separate the concepts of peace and war. On the contrary, these must be understood as cornerstones of an equivocal equation according to which to ensure peace, one must perpetually go to war—that is, not for the sake of war (and the traditional objectives of war, e.g., territorial defense or conquest, imperialism, colonization, reclamation), but precisely for the sake of peace. Within this regime of obsessive security, peace has thus become the postmodern term for a war that no longer has any natural and definite goal, scope or time frame, but takes place in all kinds of possible contexts in which global society seeks peace everywhere.²³ Peace—to rephrase Clausewitz—is the continuation of war with other means.

Linking these speculative philosophical-political thoughts to a reflection on the critical potential of contemporary art can in itself seem almost outrageously misplaced. Rehearsing an undoubtedly contentious belief in art’s ability to create a meaningful political intervention is one thing; another thing is to mention this vision explicitly in connection with the philosophical-political point that the concept of peace today is so hollowed out that it really means war. In any case, the linking illustrates that there never seems to have been a greater distance between what is going on along the geopolitical trajectory, and then the politically irrelevant and self-absorbed world of art. In their slightly mystifying and (slightly too brief) remarks on the potential of art in an age of Empire, Alliez and Negri speak of “the aesthetic power of sensation” (114), that art can express the indistinct (e.g., borders between war and peace); that the artist is trying to destroy the false image of peace; to create otherness and thus

to exhibit the sense of torment in what they call the 'over-display' of peace to war; and finally that art constitutes an aesthetic anticipation of a communist future.²⁴ It would be tempting to draw the conclusion that this mystifying jargon simply indicates that Alliez and Negri have no particular, concrete bid as to how art plays a genuinely radical role—thus inscribing their essay in a series of recent attempts to formulate utopian and bewildering aesthetic potentials of political radicalism in today's society. The problem Alliez and Negri identify—that the concept of peace today has become so hollow, inclusive and equivocal that it can encompass a phenomenon like permanent warfare—in one sense ironically mirrors the solution they come up with in the form of an impressive inventory of deliberately perplexing statements about art's utopian potential; i.e., a definition that in fact means the exact opposite—or rather, that art also fails in creating an exempt space in a world where the exception has already been made permanent.

The State of Nature

In terms of the crucial question of the challenges of identifying this exempt space—how can art make a political intervention without simultaneously losing its aesthetic dimension, that is, that which makes it a work of art? As mentioned, it seems almost outrageous to move from these lofty philosophical-political discussions to a reflection on modern art—which not only testifies to the distance between these two areas, but also precisely points to the problem identified by Alliez and Negri: the problem to think beyond the all-appropriating contemporary political space.

What we find in *The Weather Project*, we argue, is not a utopian space outside this total sphere of so-called peace. On the contrary, this work seems to create a space of radical inclusion. How are we to conceptualize this radical inclusion, and what is its relation to the political? As Richard Dormant observes, *The Weather Project* creates a space that enables an experience of becoming part of something greater, a form of subjectivity that extends beyond the isolated individual experience; to become part of a vast cosmic whole, and at the same time to experience the radical insignificance of one's own individuality. In that sense, Dormant suggests, it is almost as if the work revives an awe-inspiring, primal, religious instinct.²⁵ As Morton observes; we find ourselves within something infinitely greater than ourselves.²⁶

Pursuing these thoughts further, one could argue that the work performs a modern-day version of an ancient (solar) ritual, whose main function was to remind individuals of their absolute dependence on the infinite and unimaginable forces of nature, and implicitly the individual's helplessness; and thus, ultimately, what forms the basis of *the political community*. The gigantic, artificial sun thus seems to dissolve all differences, creating a space in which we float together in a large mass of unlimited bodies, united in the warm, tender, golden and perpetual sunlight. Bathed in this light flickers all kinds of things past—the sacred, the natural, the marvelous, our childhood, the perfect day at the beach, in the park; the sum of all our best memories that warm us on a cold winter's day. In this light, these golden moments last forever

as they flow together in an indescribable sense of oneness, thus transcending the effects of the individual, the delimiting, the marginalizing, the categorizing, the temporal, the specific. Against the background of this enormous sun, everything else is transformed into a mellow shadow world in which individuals appear as tiny insignificant dots.

To Freud, this is the feeling of ‘the oceanic’, a term that refers to the *unio mystica* experience of transindividual connectedness and solidarity with the world.²⁷ It is the symbiotic-imaginary experience of the solitary individual’s pre-symbolic dissolution into the mass, the collective—where the individual voice becomes one with the crowd and vice versa. From a political perspective, the oceanic experience is similar to the event of finding oneself submerged in or engulfed by a sea of bodies—suddenly, spontaneously, temporarily—demanding the same thing, e.g., during a demonstration, a protest, or a revolution; when every individual in a miraculous-euphoric moment of ecstasy finds common ground around the collective will and body.

In the midst of this atmosphere of absolute peace, one finds at the same time something apocalyptic in *The Weather Project*; as if we stood before the end of everything, the last glow of the sun’s dying fire, before darkness envelops us forever. It is a fateful condition which, in an imaginative moment, reminds us of that fatal instant of madness when Camus’ character Meursault fires a gun four times at a person lying on a beach. It is a moment emptied of meaning, devoid of time, an inexplicable act intensified in the present to such an extent that tomorrow carries absolutely no significance. For Meursault, the situation simply means nothing at all except the intensity of the moment; *à cause du soleil*. It is the moment when we forget ourselves, our individuality, and once again find ourselves gripped by nature’s obviousness, its absurdity, contingency and meaninglessness.

It is in this sense that *The Weather Project* brings us back to an original state of being, a place where everything was still marvelous, pristine, potentially dangerous and awe-inspiring. Here, one could rightly claim that the reaction which the work seemed to elicit in people was in many ways equivalent to what one might call the original relation to nature; nature as fearful otherness, as animistic, as terrifying in all its might. The work creates an indescribably atmospheric atmosphere that is completely devoid of objects (other than ourselves): gone is the messiness of life, the disorderliness, complications, conditionalities, nuances, confusions, alienations, the footnotes, and the text written in small letters. What remains is the naked, pure relation to nature, its otherness, and thus the relation to ourselves. We are momentarily placed in front of a mysterious object in the same way as the apes in front of the huge monolith in *Space Odyssey 2001*. In Kubrick’s film, the monolith represents the truth as it appears to the prehistoric mind (as well as the future truth to the contemporary mind): a moment of radical enlightenment that necessarily must appear in the form of a strange, inexplicable, unnatural, disturbing, and miraculous thing whose purpose is unknown, but which we cannot ignore—because it fundamentally changes the coordinates of the present way of life. The monolith—like Eliasson’s enormous solar disk—is the strange Otherness whose incomprehensible strangeness is preserved

in the encounter. It is thus, one could argue, in this way that Eliasson's work creates an impossible glimpse of a pre-historical experience long before the world was transformed along the structures of rationality and individuality. That is, a world in which people have no control over daylight, groping blindly and helplessly for guidance in the immense darkness of ever-lasting nights, entirely at the mercy of nature's whims.²⁸

What we find here is precisely the experience of what Thomas Hobbes described as the state of nature. Characteristic of this state is the lack of any definitions, boundaries, rights. There is nothing true or wrong since the distinction is simply non-existent; the same goes for the beautiful, the good, etc.²⁹ The point here is that the state of nature cannot be understood within the framework or conditions of the normal state; its radicality lies precisely in the experience that there is nothing beyond this condition—that is, other than the birth of the political community, and, in the same breath, the conditions of possibilities enabling the rise sovereignty, or what Hobbes calls the Leviathan.³⁰

The Weather Project recreates a backdrop and atmosphere that, precisely because of its overwhelming aesthetics, basically revives—sublimely—the long-forgotten sense of what Hobbes used to call the state of nature, i.e., the wild, lawless state outside the statutory territory of the state, and from which it was the primary task of the sovereign state to protect its inhabitants. It is in the natural state that one finds absolute freedom; the absolute right of the individual to create its own definitions.³¹ The problem is, however, that the concept of 'freedom' also loses its meaning in a world where everyone else has exactly the same rights (e.g., robbing your house). Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically 'utopian' about this moment; no dizzying openness that holds untold potentials of emancipation. On the contrary, this pre-political moment is radically open-ended in the sense that it both points back to nature in all its brutal, pristine purity, but at the same time orients itself towards power, the artificial, limitations, borders, and constraints: the rise of Leviathan, the sovereign, and thus the necessity of the political community.

More precisely, one could say that the moment contains a duality or divisiveness that manifests itself in an insoluble conflict: between freedom and unfreedom, peace and war, power and powerlessness, individuality and community, naturalness and artificiality—i.e., all the binary contradictions that together form the root and *raison d'être* of the political. In a sense, it could be said that it is precisely this duality that Eliasson's *The Weather Project* strives for, and which millions of people instinctively responded to by naturally joining artificially created communities, there, in the midst of the Turbine Hall: the very moment of the birth of the political.

The Weather Project is a work emerging in that epoch immediately after the global-universal space—what Hardt and Negri have called Empire—where the idea of absolute peace is increasingly challenged. It is in this totally inclusive world, where the last remnants of the state of nature have been permanently eradicated (in the form of permanent states of exception), that Eliasson's

work revives the very framework of what originally created the foundation of the political, i.e., the fascination and need for the political: a pre-political *Ur-scene* that testifies to the original moment of division that later came to haunt all free, democratic societies—and which the West momentarily believed it had brought to an end in the late 20th century.

Conclusion

This article has looked at one of the 21st century's most popular recent installation works, Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, which still is probably the Danish-Icelandic artist's most famous work. To explain both the aesthetic potential within Eliasson's oeuvre and the enormous popularity of the work, we have argued that it essentially addresses an aesthetic conflict between a critical *and* a populist dimension, or, more specifically—reformulates this conflict. For what seems to be clear is that although the critical dimension is explicitly present in the work, it is rendered largely insignificant in terms of the overall aesthetic experience. What we find, then, is a work whose aesthetics in many ways attempts to distance itself from late 20th century predecessors by blatantly surrendering to a seductive spectacle that suspends the critical. In doing so, *The Weather Project* points towards a new political paradigm emerging around the beginning of the 21st century, which in more recent years seems to have found a temporary culmination through events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president. The post-9/11 political paradigm moved away from an idea prevalent during the late 20th century embodied in Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history, and the concomitant idea of the absolutely secure world (and, by implication, the erasure of the outside/inside distinction). After an ill-defined war on terror that in all likelihood has made the world considerably less secure, financial crises that have made the gap between rich and poor even wider, the rise of fascism and populism amidst even the oldest and most solid democratic institutions, and more generally a widening division between 'the people' and 'the elite'—it is as if we have returned to political antagonisms that many thought were no longer relevant. As we have argued, it is within this context that one may appreciate *The Weather Project's* intervention as an art work recreating an atmosphere, a mood, a scene, that reminds us of a collective body, the binding of which is essentially a pre-political moment—a moment at which we may, yet again, ask the forgotten question: why we ever needed the political in the first place.

Endnotes:

1. Tate Modern's exhibition *In Real Life* runs from 11 July 2019, to 5 January 2020. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson> (accessed online November 2019).
2. Tate Modern's exhibition *Ice Watch* ran from 11 December to 20 December, 2018. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson-and-minik-rosing-ice-watch> (accessed online November 2019).
3. See Johnson 320-21.
4. The historical context of the work is crucial here; on February 15, 2003, more than one million

- people had protested against the UK's planned involvement in the Iraq War—in spite of which Tony Blair's government still went ahead to support the American-led invasion. People at *The Weather Project*, as Tim Jonze explains, arranged themselves on the floor to form the letters “Bush go home.” See: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/02/how-we-made-olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
5. As the American political scientist Robert Kagan has argued, the *The Jungle is Growing Back* (as his book is called), meaning more specifically that the American-led liberal world order today is on the wane as we return to an older world order.
 6. See Tushnet 589-590.
 7. The exhibition was part of the Unilever series. It was curated by Susan May and Maeve Polkinhorn. It ran from 16 October 2003 to 21 March 2004. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
 8. Around 4000 square meters were covered by thin aluminium mirror plates some 25 meters in the air. For a description of how Eliasson and his team built *The Weather Project*, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/02/how-we-made-olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
 9. See Molesworth 50.
 10. See Richard Dorment, “A Terrifying Beauty”: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> (accessed online November 2019).
 11. This is a recurring motif in Eliasson's works; see Forster 180.
 12. As Forster comments in an interview with Eliasson: “A sunset is not something that is measured in meters, but the hall is. So by immersing a phenomenon into that hall, or giving the simulation of such a phenomenon, the hall itself sort of disappeared. That is the other side of this dual reality ... one is viewing, and the other one might call immersion. You're being overwhelmed, you're being absorbed into it, you're being transported by an experience that deprives you of a hands-on sense of where you are—exactly the opposite of the viewing device, which starts from your own dimensions and extends them into infinity” (182).
 13. For accounts of people's behaviour during the exhibition, see Frichot 32; and Bishop 77.
 14. See Gryntsztejn 73.
 15. See Rebentisch (2003); Bishop (2005); Coulter-Smith (2005).
 16. See de Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality.”
 17. See May 34.
 18. See Gryntsztejn 25.
 19. It is in this sense that irony, metafiction, metalepsis, parabasis and other forms of mimetic disruptions are ways to *prevent* quixotic madness, i.e., to remind us that we are—after all—only in the presence of fiction.
 20. This definition draws on Carl Schmitt's notion of the political, which essentially comes down to the ability to distinguish friend from enemy. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes: “This provides a definition in the sense of a criterion and not as an exhaustive definition or one indicative of substantial content. Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses: good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere, and so on” (26).
 21. In one of the few essays discussing the political implications of Eliasson's work, Bruno Latour discusses global warming and the potential risks of climate change. See Latour 30-32. What we want to stress in this article is a notion of the political at a much more fundamental level, one that pertains to the very idea of a community as well as the sustainability of this community.
 22. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 3-21; and *Multitude* 3-35.

23. See Alliez & Negri 112.
24. Ibid. 114.
25. See Richard Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty":
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> (accessed online November 2019).
26. See Morton.
27. Freud discusses this notion in a letter exchange with Romain Rolland. He develops a more elaborate critique in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930). For a critical overview of this history, see Maharaj 474-475.
28. See also Eliasson's essay, "Museums are radical," in which he reflects on how weather conditions affect people in modern life. This concern was one of the main sources of inspiration for *The Weather Project*.
29. As Hobbes, in a remarkably ominous passage in *Leviathan*, observes: "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death" (78).
30. See Hobbes's "XIII: Of the Natural Conditions of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery." *Leviathan*, pp. 76-88.
31. As Jörg Spieker comments; "In the absence of definitive standards of truth and morality, the Hobbesian state of nature constantly generate different and competing political movements. There are, at least potentially, as many political bodies as there are individuals since every individual is capable of constructing her own understanding of the world" ("Foucault and Hobbes" 193).

References

- Alliez and Negri. "Peace and War." *Theory, Culture & Society* 20:2 (2003): 109-118.
- Bishop, Claire. *Installation Art: A Critical History*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005.
- Coulter-Smith, Graham. *Deconstructing Installation Art: Fine Art and Media Art, 1986-2006*. Accessed online November 2019: <http://www.installationart.net/>
- de Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd Ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. 187-228.
- Eliasson, Olafur. "Museums are radical." *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*. Ed. Susan May. London: Tate Publishing, 2004. 129-178.
- Forster, Kurt W. "In Conversation." *Perspecta* 42 (2010): 177-190.
- Frichot, H el ene. "Olafur Eliasson and the Circulation of Affects and Percepts: In Conversation." *Architectural Design* 78:3 (2008): 30-35.
- Gryntysztejn, Madeleine & Birnbaum, Daniel & Speaks, Michael. *Olafur Eliasson*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2002.
- Hancox, Simone. "The Performativity of Ice and Global Ecologies in Olafur Eliasson's *Your waste of time*." *Performance Research* 18:6 (2013): 54-63.
- Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000.

- Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* [1651]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Johnson, Grant. "Citing the Sub: Marc Jacobs, Olafur Eliasson and the Fashion Show." *Fashion Theory* 19:3 (2015): 315-330.
- Kagan, Robert. *The Jungle Grows Back: American and Our Imperiled World*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2018.
- Latour, Bruno. "Atmosphère, Atmosphère." *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*. Ed. Susan May. London: Tate Publishing, 2004. 29-41.
- Maharaj, Ayon. "The challenge of the oceanic feeling: Romain Rolland's mystical critique of psychoanalysis and his call for a 'new science of the mind'." *History of European Ideas* 43:5 (2017): 474-493.
- May, Susan, ed. *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*. London: Tate Publishing, 2004.
- Moleworth, Charles. "Olafur Eliasson and the Charge of Time." *Salmagundi* 160/161 (2008/2009): 42-52.
- Morton, Timothy. "We Have Never Been Displaced." *Olafur Eliasson homepage*.
Accessed online November 2019: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/read/MDA117977/we-have-never-been-displaced-by-timothy-morton>
- Rebentisch, Juliane. *Ästhetik der Installation*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.
- Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political* [1932]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Spiegel, Andreas. "Olafur Eliasson: Non-Trueness as the Nature of Theatre." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 2 (2000): 97-105.
- Spieker, Jörg. "Foucault and Hobbes on Politics, Security, and War." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 36:3 (2011): 187-199.
- Tushnet, Mark. "Postmodernism and Democracy." *American Literary History* 7:3 (1995): 582-590.
- Wallace, Isabelle Loring. "Technology and the Landscape: Turner, Pfeiffer and Eliasson after the Deluge." *Visual Culture in Britain* 12:1 (2011): 57-75.