

On *Vibrations* (by Olafur Eliasson)

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*written for: History of Architectural Theory//Mark Wigley//
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Olafur Eliasson's "Vibrations" is a text that describes his theory of perceiving the world as a constant flux of movement- a field of vibrations. YES (Your Engagement Sequence) is a potential tool developed by Eliasson to enhance an individualized experience of life through this awareness of vibrations and engagement with time. This research paper investigates his theory, one of Eliasson's few texts that describes the philosophy/theory that kindle the intention of his artistic endeavors. It looks at the overall theory and its relationship to his light installation "*Your Colour Memory*", the specific tools set forth, and the insufficiencies in the theory itself.

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Introduction

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Olafur Eliasson's large-scale installations encompass an awareness of and a sensitivity to the public's interaction with the artistic work. Using elements occurring naturally in nature- water, air, light- and scientific methods to evidence their behavior, the works aim to engage the viewer in an entire experience of space that toys with adapted modes of perception.

"Vibrations" is one of the limited number of Eliasson's published pieces that actually employs text to describe the philosophy and the theory that kindle the intention of his artistic endeavors. The composition strives to investigate Eliasson's outlook on the current tendencies of perceiving experiences, phenomena, and objects. Eliasson introduces a model that sets forth time as an ignored- but central- factor in current perception. According to Eliasson, the current mode of perception can be altered with his model to negotiate a more engaging experience with and in spaces.

"Vibrations" introduces Eliasson's theory that perceive the world as a constant flux of movement; a field of vibrations. There is a continual "relationship of co-production" between an individual and respective surroundings, and this relationship exists through mutable bonds and recurrent negotiations.¹ The world as a field of vibrations signifies the lack of stagnancy, singularity, solid objectification, or fixity. People, objects, and experiences do not exist as temporally linear trajectories. Rather, just as vibrations reverberate and pulsate, all experiences, actions, and phenomena exist in relation to context, to time, and to one another. Subsequently, they emerge, take course, die and ultimately, undulate amongst one another, thus engendering effects and consequences. Furthermore, through awareness of time in the daily navigation of life, both memory and expectation play a prodigious role in shaping a highly individual engagement with life. The consequence of this magnification of these vibrations is that "one

¹ Olafur Eliasson. "Vibrations" *Caminos de Naturaleza/Paths of Nature*. (Madrid: La Fabrica Editorial and Fundaciòn Telefònica, 2006) 16.

may create a different viewpoint- likewise, of course, a construction- from which alternative spatial conceptions may appear.”² Eliasson’s art installation, “*Your Colour Memory*”, which can almost be seen as a sort of projection of his theory, permits the viewer to be immersed in a luminous bath of colored light that constantly shifts gradients and shades. In fact, “paramount for Eliasson is that whatever resources he chooses to deploy will produce events and effects that affirm their... irrecoverability, that resist commodification and objectification.”³ The space, flooded with an all-encompassing colored illumination, demands that time alters each individual experience with the perception of the light’s color.

YES (Your Engagement Sequence) is developed by Eliasson as a potential tool to enhance an individualized experience of life through this perception and awareness of vibrations. The term attempts to describe the implications of engagement with time. YES can be interpreted as a device, to be employed in every personal experience that would inevitably deal with time, that negotiates a more involved relationship with the encountered experience or element. Eliasson advocates the benefits of incorporating YES into perception.

Eliasson makes comparative statements that relate YES to human existence, but he fails to provide, as he has done with the quotidian examples sprinkled throughout the essay, a simple and clear definition of YES. In such a way, the lack of a definition is a safety net and a defense mechanism. This allows for the details of YES to be interpreted on individual terms by each reader, permitting Eliasson to set forth his idea without specifying precise boundaries that could possibly be challenged by another person. Similarly, throughout the essay, Eliasson’s textual presentation of his theory is often punctured with lack of clarity and definition. These ruptures

² Ibid. 12.

³ Jonathan Crary. “Illuminations of the Unforeseen” *Your Colour Memory*. (Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2006) 21.

manifest themselves in segments that are difficult to understand, and involve essential terminology that is employed without being defined. Despite these shortcomings, Eliasson's theory of *vibrations* and Your Engagement Sequence propose a new and individual mode of perception, intense and charged in their potential to amplify the experience of experience.

"Vibrations" emerged in several comprehensive exhibition catalogues of Eliasson's work in 2006. The essay is offered in a compilation of texts of other writers, mostly sequences of texts that analyze Eliasson as an artist and his creations. The essay precedes the series of images of the artwork in the catalogues; it is not published alone, but instead as a preliminary complement to the frenzy of images that follows. With an exception of one passage of the essay, there is no organizational structure to it- no subtitles, no list of contents, creating the illusion of a simple, cohesive text. Instead the text seems to address three deviant agendas and can almost be broken down into several portions. The distinctions occurring in the text include the preface; a systematic six-item list of Eliasson's model and the focal point around which the other so-called chapters are oriented; an investigation, including scientific input, of the world as a field of vibrations and waves; and an analysis of art practice and the socio-cultural influence of the role of the institution in art.

The Preface

Eliasson opens the preface, not with his own words, but with a quotation from Buckminster Fuller. Within this quote, the direction of Eliasson's composition is announced, for he cites a part of the quote in capital letters:

UNIVERSE IS NOT CONFORMING TO A THREE-DIMENSIONAL
PERPENDICULAR-PARALLEL FRAME OF REFERENCE.⁴

Eliasson's usage of Fuller's quote as an introduction to his own writing serves to establish a clear and reverent regard for Fuller. While this is a humble gesture, it is also a strategic move that utilizes Fuller's high visibility and affiliation with a cross-disciplinary exploration of science, architecture and space, as a way to gain the reader's trust. Eliasson aligns himself with Fuller by employing Fuller's quote, which uses the entire field of physics research to back up his statement, to substantiate his own theory of the world as a field of vibrations. Placing this quotation under the spotlight also emphasizes Eliasson's desire to be identified as a figure reinterpreting spheres of the scientific.

Following Fuller's quote, Eliasson proceeds: "*Everything* is, *I believe*, situated within a process- *everything* is in motion, with a faster or slower speed, and *everything* is colored by intentionality."⁵ The introduction describes the idea of "everything's" involvement in constant motion, evolution and an intrinsic relationship to time. In this statement, Eliasson describes the world as a field of vibrations. At the onset of his text, Eliasson has already inserted a reference in the first-person. The fragment "I believe" returns ownership of the text to Eliasson; Fuller's influence has been presented and at this point, Eliasson demands the reader's attention back to his own ideas. At the same time, while Eliasson makes a strong opening statement that encompasses "everything", he also forewarns the reader that his writing is not a truth, but an opinion, thus alleviating himself from the heavy responsibility of asserting a generalized truth. He then goes on to explain what he intends by making the claim of "everything." He does so by employing inclusive pronouns- "...it is also applicable when *we* are dealing with something

⁴ Olafur Eliasson. "Vibrations" *Caminos de Naturaleza/Paths of Nature*. (Madrid: La Fabrica Editorial and Fundaciòn Telefònica, 2006) 10.

⁵ Ibid. 10.

personal...”⁶ This involves the reader, allowing the reader a shared sentiment, an alignment with Eliasson. He continues to utilize the pronouns “we”, “us” and “our” throughout the essay, thus establishing a direct connection and fostering a sense of community with the reader.

The problematic issue that Eliasson poses is the disconnection from time and objectification that *modern society* imposes in the network of spaces, phenomena, institutions and relationships. He clearly recognizes current societal networks as the core dilemma and the root of the ubiquitous disconnection and unawareness experienced, for they truncate time as a crucial factor of perception. It is these social constructions and customs, erected by cultural institutions, which are the weighty impediments to an unadulterated perceptive experience of life. The result is that “...our senses are not used to experiencing time or temporal sequences, and we have thus become accustomed to regarding objects as being timeless... the rules we have constructed for the creation of a common space come to lose their content... They become normative and start to reproduce themselves incessantly in versions that only become more and more formalistic.”⁷ Eliasson refers to current times, but as he identifies the dilemmas and the mute ways of experiencing the world, caused and prolonged by the procedures of modern society, he is already making a statement that modern society is a passing era. He sets himself apart from these authoritative machines by diagnosing their mechanisms and criticizing them as inhibitory. He infers that the future- and an acceptance of his ideas on changing modes of perception- can initiate positive redefinition of humans and relationships to objects and space. In order to grant accessibility to this language, Eliasson provides examples that portray his ideas in more quotidian and conventional scenarios. In this case, he refers to the entertainment industry, and the constraints of its commercial aims, as an example of a sphere of society that

⁶ Ibid. 10.

⁷ Ibid. 10.

inflicts this divide between objects and time. By expressing lament towards the deficiencies of modern-day society, Eliasson embeds within the reader the desire for a tool to navigate a more engaged experience of life; an opportune gap in which his model offers a powerful proposition.

The Model

Artist or scientist? The theory highlights the hovering uncertainty of Eliasson's position as an artist or a scientist. While he is commonly regarded as an artist, within the theory he has positioned himself more as a scientist, hungry to breed changes and yet mindfully cautious and calculating in his scientific postulations. Eliasson's scheme for innovating the human relationship with time takes form in an ordered, and hierarchical list. His model follows, as his opening statement claims, a process; a series of steps that occurs over time, serving to investigate the development of an idea. It is expressed in a format that divides these six steps into a numerical sequence. Each step is defined by a subtitle. This systematic template attempts to follow an organizational method, of bite-sized steps, that induce a more accessible digestion on the reader. Additionally, drawing upon the scientific references Eliasson has made, the list follows an organizational strategy that has become a standard in scientific discourses. The chronological hierarchy of the list itself emphasizes his insistence on time as an inseparable element from all.

The first component addresses *the idea*. The investigation begins by pronouncing several "facts" that Eliasson assumes the reader and him agree upon: "We *may* agree on the fact that the development of an idea...is processual, that is, occurs over time... the idea that a thought could be conceived without taking time into consideration does not make any sense."⁸

⁸ Ibid. 12.

While Eliasson makes these assumptions, he also exposes his apprehension to outwardly claiming his ideas as an authoritative absolute. This also adds to the air of modesty and humbleness that Eliasson has already introduced to the reader and that he continues to insert in sips of shy assertions.

The repetition of “we may” and “I think” is prevalent throughout the essay. Also occurring frequently throughout the essay, in contrast to these polite and humble accessories, are bold, definitive statements. Thus, a juxtaposition in tone of modesty and assertiveness, a combination of imperatives/avowals and suppositions, is created. The result can almost be seen as a sort of passive-aggressive voice, a rhythmic dynamic that utilizes these two different tones to try to convince the reader. Similarly, Eliasson also shifts between more convoluted, complex thoughts and simple examples that grant accessibility to the reader. This is evident in the first step of his model. Providing simple examples of basic, daily activities that occur over time enable his scheme to be read through familiar routines. Indeed, all the components of our life rituals are processes; continually kinetic actions, not distinct or disparate singular moments.

The second step discusses *the application of form to the idea*. Here, Eliasson describes the process in which the communication of an idea takes place through an objectification, the application of a “formal language.”⁹ As a side note to this portion of the model, Eliasson also comments that many ornamental iterations, void of content and meaning, can also emerge from this step of the process. His matter-of-fact tone- “they *simply* find pleasure in the formal gymnastics themselves, expressing *nothing but* the décor value...”¹⁰ expose his disdain for work that can be categorized as such.¹⁰ Here, Eliasson creates a distinction between such craftsmen of superficial work and himself. He implies that he possesses knowledge to distinguish between

⁹ Ibid. 12.

¹⁰ Ibid. 12.

work with content and work of decorative intent, and that his own work bears strong intention to express meaning. Subsequently, Eliasson also implies that his model consists of substantial depth and significance.

The third step, titled “*the communication of the idea*” sets forth the idea that the expression of an idea accumulates, both inadvertently and intentionally, “formal dimensions and layers regardless of whether I like them or not.”¹¹ Eliasson’s confession that the unexpected and unintended become an inevitable part of the communication of the idea reveals his own subjection to the consequences of communication. By using himself and his work as an example, he supports his claim that forms are temporal and in constant flux with their surroundings. This corresponds to his idea of the *vibrations*; that in fact, the continual cause-and-effect and all-encompassing mutability sets up the security of unending inconstancy. Once again, singularity and autonomy are obsolete ideas; there is always a connection to other contexts, things, people and situations that create an enduring network of ripples and waves.

He continues: “In this way, time adds a great amount of *relativity* to any form... and the suggestion that form exists at all as a static, final language becomes obsolete.”¹² As a complex and expansive idea, relativity is at the core of Eliasson’s discourse, yet he fails to explicate clearly his own terms of its extents. It can be presumed that Eliasson refers to another pillar of scientific postulation: Einstein’s theory of relativity. His statement, building upon the theory of *vibrations*, employs Einstein’s idea of relativity as corroboration that nothing exists independent of anything else. Instead, everything proceeds relative to other elements, and even space and time are not absolutes but are framed by reference to “everything else.”

¹¹ Ibid. 12.

¹² Ibid. 12.

In the third step, Eliasson postulates that muffling time has been largely due to the aims of capitalism. To expound his view that overthrowing such a system is a positive move, he insists that he is certain that this will change. These assertiveness of this affirmation contrasts with the modesty of his suppositions, add to the strategic rhythm of his composition.

The fourth step addresses the idea that *time is individual*. Time is experienced differently through each individual. Eliasson enunciates that sensory stimulation and even life in itself are distinctive movements in the field of vibrations, that affect the field and are perceived by each individual diversely. This step is a key tenet of Eliasson's model and a potent and meaningful one. This segment upholds the importance of a personalized, intimate and deeper relationship with a world constantly in motion. It is the preservation of this unique and diverse experience that he emphasizes. In pushing forward the idea that experience of time is different for each person, Eliasson creates a simple example to illustrate this thought and to make it accessible to the reader. Within the example, he offers himself as sacrifice by considering his own mortality: "Death arrests the temporality of my body... and I would therefore argue that it seems responsible to talk about your time and my time..."¹³ The gesture works to amplify the sense of intimacy that Eliasson aims to create between the reader and himself by addressing both parties directly. His capacity to speak about his own death is transmitted with such candor and lack of inhibition, highlighting his own serious stance on the theory and opening up a door to the reader to believe it as well.

Throughout the passage, Eliasson, in direct dialogue with the reader continues: "Not only our immediate experiences are a subjective matter; our memories and expectations also

¹³ Ibid. 14.

have a highly individual impact on how we perceive what we see.”¹⁴ These segments of the theory touch upon powerful considerations that suggest the profundity and potency of maintaining individualized and personal experience. Experience, as do all other elements within Eliasson’s model of the world as a field of vibrations, does not occur as a singular happening. The perception and human processing occurring simultaneously are inevitably influenced by personal memories, associations and imposed desires. Thus, experience becomes linked to this network of an incredibly intimate reservoir of reflections. The non-formulaic alchemy that binds these recollections also triggers unique perception with time as an inseparable factor.

The fifth step highlights a climactic surge in Eliasson’s six-component model. The title presents the key backbone of Eliasson’s model and the discussions that follow: “*Your Engagement Sequence (YES)*.” The given acronym, YES, imitates the format of scientific names, granting the idea a technical and more convincing form. Eliasson himself justifies this acronym by arguing that this relativity “should be given a physical name for radical scientific laboratory purposes.”¹⁵ The formality of such a title reveals Eliasson’s desire for YES to be a scientifically researched and corroborated idea. Additionally, the truncation of the title to a short abbreviation allows the idea, now in compact form, to be managed, referred to, and discussed with more ease. By employing the possessive pronoun “your”, Eliasson grants the reader ownership and involvement in YES.

“YES can be seen as exemplary of the level of relativity in what is traditionally conceived as a truth. When a so-called truthful statement is made you should therefore add your personal YES in order to relate to, see through, and possibly make use of the statement. By including YES as a central element of perception, the governing dogma

¹⁴ Ibid. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid. 14.

of timelessness and static objecthood may be renegotiated, thus making your responsibility for an active engagement in the concrete situation apparent.”¹⁶

The sixth item considers *the consequences of the reintroduction of temporality*.

Discussing the new issues arising from the YES proposal, Eliasson asserts that YES could be so radical as to “shatter...the whole Western definition of truth and non-truth.”¹⁷ This statement identifies YES as a radical and powerful tool that could overturn conventional modes of negotiating life experiences. Indeed, YES is to be utilized to engender this enhanced perception. Eliasson proposes that the shift to a more engaged mode of navigating life is inevitable. For, “when we accept and implement the relativity of so-called truth by using yes...a general sense of responsibility in our relationship to our surroundings may be achieved.”¹⁸ By establishing that experience is individual, Eliasson also deduces that greater awareness and understanding of the disturbance caused to the field of vibrations means that one has more control, and thus assumes more responsibility, in the navigation of the world. In such a way, YES, though not explicitly defined, becomes the beginning of a useful mode for creating a more conscious- and consequently more sensitive- engagement with the world. Eliasson himself imbues his idea with a power to radicalize the experience of awareness. Sensitive to the cultural context of his comment, he also makes sure to specify that the hypothetical provocation that could occur is relegated to Western ideas of truth.

The Model, Vibrations, YES and “Your Colour Memory”

“*Your Colour Memory*” can be considered in relationship to Eliasson’s theoretical postulations. By witnessing the transformations occurring over time on the space,

¹⁶ Ibid. 14.

¹⁷ Ibid. 14.

¹⁸ Ibid. 14.

conventionally deemed as insular and static, the entire framework of perception is expanded. The viewer must renegotiate his/her engagement with the space. Since experiencing color is inherently linked to the conditions of light, the experience also becomes a cultivated one, influenced by memories and associations. Time, in this case, is perceived as a truly individual experience; emphasis is placed on the “notion of the relativity of seeing.”¹⁹ In this sense, the installation can be regarded as an amplified setting in which YES is called into action.

The conditions that create Eliasson’s installation encompass a curved wall spanning the interior of the space upon which light is reflected. The space is immersed in a projection of colored light, in which the color blurs from one to the next over a sequential frame of roughly 30 seconds. Thus, the room is illuminated by yellow, then orange, and so forth. The lack of hard edges, of distinctly delineated walls and angles means that Eliasson “makes it impossible for a spectator to objectify the chromatic events as a property of a delimited surface or screen to which we have a contemplative relation.”²⁰ The base elements, that limit our scope of perception and relegate us to view the space conventionally as a set of planes, have been eliminated. Eliasson has therefore set up certain conditions and scale within the physical space itself that deny the viewer a passive viewing experience. Rather, the magnitude of the casting of light and the frequent change of color create a dynamic experience that necessitates a sensorial engagement of the viewer, who is provoked to see beyond just the colored light.

The installation is treated by the artist as a science experiment. Eliasson describes the installation as an investigation of “aspects of color perception, one of which is afterimages and

¹⁹ Olafur Eliasson. “Some Ideas About Color” *Your Colour Memory*. (Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2006) 79.

²⁰ Jonathan Crary. “Illuminations of the Unforeseen” *Your Colour Memory*. (Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2006) 18.

their temporal relationship with their sources.”²¹ A spectator enters the space and is soaked in a bath of colored light. The color gradually fades, disappears, and melts into another one. Upon entering the space, the current color of the room will cause the eyes to reactively produce the color on the opposite end of the color spectrum, thus mitigating the intensity of the color. The perception of light is driven by two color curves working contemporaneously: one reads the light of the work itself, and the other involves the delayed response produced by the eyes. As Eliasson describes, “...If I were to enter the color-saturated room some time after you, my experience of color would differ substantially from yours, as you would already be enrolled in a sequence of wall colors and afterimages that determine your present experience.”²² The result is a stimulation triggered by the illuminations that provide a rhythmic perceptual experience; the brain processes the throb and flux between the colors, rather than seeing simply a solid, static color. “*Your Colour Memory*”, as Eliasson described in the components of his model, is a processual experience in which time becomes a dominant factor in the experiential language of the installation. Through awareness of the consequences of time, one is able to comprehend the agents at work that create a certain perception of color and change. As YES functions, one must pay attention to the role of time in the experience, thus forging a more enhanced awareness of the situation.

The role of memory and personal associations with particular colors must also be considered. These elements spur a larger network of forces at play in the process of perception. Cultural connotations modify and refine each spectator’s spatial-temporal conception. After all, each culture has varied views of what makes colors different from one another- Eliasson

²¹ Olafur Eliasson. “Some Ideas About Color” *Your Colour Memory*. (Pennsylvania: Arcadia University Art Gallery, 2006) 77.

²² Ibid. 78.

commonly provides the example that in Eskimo culture, there are dozens of names for shades of white, given the abundance of snow- and the symbolism of diverse colors. Recognizing the multiplicity of cultural, cognitive and actual physical (the shifts in color) forces at work, the spectator becomes involved in the field of vibrating forces, further contributing to the vibration with personal perception, awareness and consequent reaction.

The configuration of the installation room invites many spectators to engage in the space simultaneously. The collective public experience of “*Your Colour Memory*” becomes a portal of engagement on the level of the community. This seems to be a significant and purposeful decision on Eliasson’s part. Imagining the application of YES on a collective scale, as a joint dispersal of amplified awareness, provides a vision for the possibilities of a more integrated and conscious community.

And After the Model...

The passages following the model are developed by appropriating several elements of the model’s discourses, but in actuality, deviate from the systematic analysis produced in the model itself. The succeeding sequence of paragraphs changes focal point without clearly marking an end to neither one discourse nor the beginning of another. Such a non-cohesive format, while outwardly may be confusing, allow Eliasson to seemingly corroborate and contextualize the ideas presented in the preface and the model in fragments that touch upon direct spatial considerations, his own art practice, further scientific data, and the relationship between social institutions and art.

Eliasson explains that these deviations further his concepts of YES and *vibrations*, “to create alternatives to the modernistic conception of space”.²³ He contemplates the cultural and historical implications embedded into notions of space, then discusses once again the relationship to the ideas of vibrations, of constant movement, that was first touched upon in the preface. The scientific discourse that follows recounts both science history facts and describes Eliasson’s latest artistic experiments that endeavor to harness his ideas of everything as fields of vibrations. Within these discussions, the same looming question- Artist or Scientist?- appears. Similar to the prior passages of the model itself, here Eliasson presents himself more as a scientist. He describes the endeavors of his studio as maneuvers driven by scientific curiosity. The adjacency of discussions of Heisenberg and Bohr to Eliasson’s chronicles of the endeavors enacted in his art studio works to highlight Eliasson’s awareness of physics and mathematical data. In such a way, this adjacency is also employed to legitimize Eliasson’s artistic experiments as rooted in scientific research and potential sources of scientific breakthrough. Additionally, he pushes forth his agenda of unraveling art’s potential to influence society; he speaks openly about his own interests in exploring the relationship between art, society and the mediating institutions. The link between “*Your Colour Memory*” as an art installation, the hosting space, and the potential to challenge tired and static perception with the time-conscious engagement demanded by the piece, is illuminated.

Bearing a heavy presence within Eliasson’s textual and artistic works is the scientific method. It appears in the choices he employs to articulate his ideas: the itemized list format of the model, the numerous citations of figures in the realm of scientific discovery, the scientific phenomena amplified in his installation works. This discourse is expressed with a manipulation

²³ Olafur Eliasson. “Vibrations” *Caminos de Naturaleza/Paths of Nature*. (Madrid: La Fabrica Editorial and Fundaciòn Telefònica, 2006) 18.

of language that wavers back and forth between simplicity and accessibility, and elusive, unclear definitions. However, by creating a direct dialogue with the reader, Eliasson seeks to grant general accessibility to his textual musings. "Vibrations" introduces a new model of viewing the world and makes an initial proposal of how to amplify one's navigation of this world through YES. Indeed, he sheds light upon how "Your Engagement Has Consequences on the Relativity of Your Reality." His theory generates an exciting possibility for an amplified engagement of time and experience, and the possibility for this awareness to be spread to a wider scale in order to foster an entirely different sense of a community. The products elicited by this engagement would allow the world to be negotiated in a more conscious and open way.

“Vibrations” was originally published in:

Your Engagement has Consequences on the Relativity of Your Reality. Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2006.