

PublicWorks



Olafur Eliasson
Northwest Passage, 2018

A Percent-for-Art Commission

MIT.nano, Building 12



MIT List Visual Arts Center



Olafur Eliasson's *Northwest Passage*

Caroline A. Jones

The prolific artist Olafur Eliasson has long been interested in human perception. He thinks about how humans make meaning as they move through environments, and how those embodied experiences change our separate and shared reality. *Northwest Passage* was created with this site-specific goal in mind: in the spatial environment of a simple breezeway (*passage*) connecting the MIT.nano building to the labyrinthine “infinite corridor” threading through the campus, Eliasson has crafted amorphous shapes to float over our heads, forming “an ecosystem of reflective surfaces.”¹ Cut from stainless steel, each irregular form has been given a flawless mirrored finish; several are also fitted with semicircular steel bands whose curving interiors are illuminated by LEDs behind a strongly yellow filter. As each semicircle intersects with mirrors, the reflections complete the geometry, forming luminous orbits that bathe passersby with the glowing wavelengths of a borrowed sun.

For Eliasson, art is not a stable object or thing, but an encounter. Inspiring the huge team of fabricators, designers, and thinkers who work with him every day in the four-story converted brewery in Berlin that serves as his studio (where he also lives when he’s not in Copenhagen), the artist celebrates the value of all kinds of encounters: hospitality through food, intellectual symposia, dance/publishing/art experiments, and even pedagogy (a five-year art school he ran in collaboration with Berlin’s Universität der

Künste). This hive of activity keeps expanding, encompassing a full architecture office as well as a suite of engineers collaborating on Eliasson’s *Little Sun* solar lights and chargers, aimed to benefit those without stable electricity in sub-Saharan Africa.

The most meaningful encounters for the artist, however, are those that become public art installations, where he knows that anything can happen. Speaking of one adventure in which he made a car out of *ice* covering a standard steel chassis, he said “it requires our conscious and subconscious engagement in order to sustain itself as an object”—not to mention also needing a huge freezer that visitors had to walk into, to experience the art!² More soberly, Eliasson recently went to the trouble of harvesting glacier chunks (compressed snow formed over millennia), now “calving” into the sea. Taking them by tugboat from the ocean off Greenland to Denmark, and then by refrigerated container to Paris, he installed these just-larger-than-human icebergs in a ceremonial circle during the international UN climate change negotiations (COP21) in 2015. Since the icebergs naturally melted there in the Place du Panthéon, *Ice Watch* demonstrated both physically and temporally why everyone encountering it should care about climate change. For Eliasson, the whole point was to provide the opportunity for individuals to have a physical encounter with a nine-ton iceberg—displaced by human actions, whether on an urban or planetary scale.

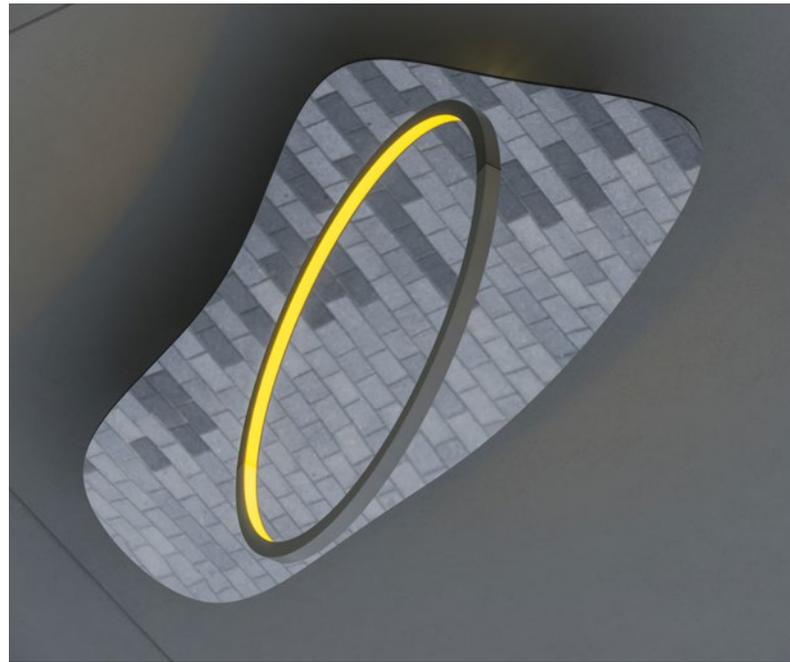
We might imagine why a Danish artist who spent a great deal of his childhood in Iceland might want to share the experience of *iciness* with normally comfortable city-dwellers, but Eliasson has other reasons for proposing such extreme encounters. Ice, a (sometimes translocated) representative of the range of states water can assume on our planet, once “encountered physically,” then “designates a way to leave the realm of the mediated image.”³ So the icebergs in Paris would confront people already familiar with the implacable data of climate change, and perhaps even jaded by the hackneyed pictures of polar bears on shrinking habitat. These “mediated images” are confronted by the huge effort required by the artist and his collaborators (geologist, Minik Rosing, with help from tugboat captains, truck drivers, and installers), who put the shrinking glaciers “in the palm of Paris.” And if you put your ear to the subliming ice, you would hear periodic pops and hisses as the air trapped between ancient snowflakes finally emerged, with a sigh, to join the 21st century’s human-added atmosphere. “It is a little pop that has travelled fifteen thousand years to meet you in Paris, and tell the story of climate change.”⁴

The melancholy of melting ice in a city plaza contrasts with the exhilaration of something playful, like a frozen ice car that can never move. *Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R Project* (2007) required viewers to enter its “habitat,” rather than being relocated to enter theirs. In both cases, the physicality of the personal encounter with ice is crucial, but the working of the art does not stop there. As with melting icebergs, the experience becomes acutely *temporal*. Eliasson likes the fact that people first peered into the giant refrigerator holding the ice car, then entered, realized how intensely cold it was, almost always *touched* the car to make sure it was really made out of ice, then hunched into their clothes and set about deciding how long they could possibly endure this “art:”

You start to rationalize your time and activities in the freezer—if you’d spend more than an hour there, it could become life threatening. Suddenly the physical encounter supersedes the visual encounter. And interestingly, what makes people stop looking at the car is simply that they’re freezing too much.⁵

What is remarkable about Eliasson’s almost 40-year career is how consistently he has asked us to direct our attention away from the purely visible, deriding it as being too easily consumed. For an artist who is known for his use of sumptuous colored light, rainbows, mirrors, and iridescent surfaces, this emphasis on the physical, temporal encounter might seem surprising. Yet he insists on complicating the purely visual with installations that require conscious movement, stimulating embodied experiences, affective memories, and above all *ideas*.

So, more than our bodies are involved in an encounter with an Eliasson installation. Once we pass under *Northwest Passage* (indeed, at the building’s northwest corner) and look up to sense the morphing reflections and ambient light, we begin to wonder what inspired the amorphous shapes and their contrapuntal arrangement.



Thoughtful visitors to Eliasson’s installations are challenged in this way, led to decode concepts and ideas that may last long after the initial encounter. Take the 2003 *The weather project* at the Tate Turbine Hall, which propelled the artist into international fame. The physical arrangement in that vast space in London was remarkably austere and simple (also deploying yellow light and mirrors).⁶ [See inset, below left.]

An enormous glowing semicircle was suspended on scaffolding up to the ceiling, where it was perfectly mirrored by a tautly stretched sheet of “projection foil” that visually completed the disk. Forming a massive imaginary sun, its light wafted throughout the enormous volume of the Turbine Hall on atmospheric mist pumped out by machines. In this thoroughly artificial setting, many visitors simply lounged on the hall’s cement floor, basking under the thermally neutral “sun” as if they were at a summer beach vacation. Yet they were encouraged to contemplate its artifice,⁷ and to wonder at the questions and percentages Eliasson had posted around town: “THE WEATHER WILL AFFECT THE ATTENDANCE OF THIS RECEPTION BY 27%,” “8 OUT OF 10 POSTCARDS MENTION THE WEATHER” or “47% BELIEVE THE IDEA OF WEATHER IN OUR SOCIETY IS BASED ON CULTURE. 53% BELIEVE THAT IT IS BASED ON NATURE.” Clearly already intrigued by our embodied obsessions with climate—which paradoxically coexist with our refusal to change behaviors to address anthropogenic global warming—Eliasson arrived at his signature blend of inviting, embodied experience and complex, even demanding thought.

Northwest Passage may be more difficult to parse than most Eliasson installations. Could the ceiling of the corridor and breezeway be the upside-down world of a child’s imagination, silver lily-pads or quicksilver footprints on a topsy-turvy “ground” above our heads? And what about its title? It turns out that just as icebergs and beaches become thought-provoking gestures once transposed to city pavement and turbine halls, so here we are offered a kind of wormhole connecting a densely trafficked campus passage in Cambridge to the opening of a new (and worrisome) passage through the Parry Channel in the Arctic (also, of course, called the Northwest Passage). Covered thickly by ice during most of human history, this ocean waterway previously had to be broken into with special ice-breaker



Eliasson. *The weather project*, 2003

ships to allow any kind of navigation. But now, this financially lucrative connector between the Baffin Bay and the Arctic Ocean that allows travel from Greenland to Alaska has melted, forming a “pattern of free-floating ice” that Eliasson has transposed onto the ceiling at MIT. It is as if a giant, world-sized Borgesian map had been folded, putting the coordinates of the newly-opened channel in the arctic on top of our gravelly spot in Cambridge, where the Laurentide glacier retreated after the last ice age 18,000 years ago.

As for the sprightly orbits of yellow? These semicircles “find their completed forms in the reflections [...] gesturing visually to the inherent connection between the spatially separated sections.”⁸ Seducing us with its beautiful design, *Northwest Passage* moves us into the body posture of wonder: *looking up*, perhaps wheeling around, “craning” our necks upward as we try to take in the piece. Interrupted in our busy-ness, we might well consider how “a group of individual elements constitutes an environment of interdependency”—and what one day’s passage might contribute to our planetary concerns.

Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967, Copenhagen, Denmark) lives and works in Copenhagen and Berlin. Eliasson’s work in sculpture, painting, photography, film, and installation have been exhibited widely throughout the world. Additionally, Eliasson has had his work represented in many prestigious collections worldwide, including those of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; Guggenheim Museum in New York; Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo, Norway; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C.; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea; and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark. Eliasson has been granted numerous awards over the years, including the Eugene McDermott Award in the Arts at MIT (2014), the Wolf Prize in Painting and Sculpture (2014), and the Joan Miró Prize (2007). In 1995 Eliasson founded Studio Olafur Eliasson, a Berlin-based think tank, to expand and leverage multi-disciplinary conceptualization and planning for future projects.

Olafur Eliasson was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members including: Arne Abramson, Director, Capital Projects, MIT; Jesús A. del Alamo, Director of the Microsystems Technology Laboratories, Donner Professor, and Professor of Electrical Engineering in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, MIT; Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Vladimir Bulović, MIT.nano Faculty Lead, Associate Dean of Innovation, Professor of Engineering, Fariborz Maseeh (1990) Chair in Emerging Technology, MIT; Pam Delpinich, Director, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Thayer Donham, Senior Project Manager, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; Samir Srouji, Principal, Wilson Architects Inc; and Travis Wanat, Senior Project Manager, Capital Projects, MIT.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *Northwest Passage*, 2015 proposal from Studio Olafur Eliasson.
- 2 Conversation with the author, 2008.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Olafur Eliasson in conversation with Cynthia Zarin, “The Artist who is Bringing Icebergs to Paris,” *The New Yorker*, December 5, 2018. Online at <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-artist-who-is-bringing-icebergs-to-paris> Accessed August 2018.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Olafur Eliasson, *The weather project*, 2003. Monofrequency lights, projection foil, haze machines, mirror foil, aluminium, scaffolding. Installation view, Tate Modern, London, 2003. Photo: Tate Photography (Andrew Dunkley & Marcus Leith). Courtesy the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles © 2003 Olafur Eliasson
- 7 “Once they had reached the end of the space, their illusions were shattered when they were allowed to discover the technical components that created the installation: a wide semicircular screen back-lit by a battery of about 200 yellow mono-frequency lamps mounted 7.7 metres from the end wall of the Hall. Almost as though revealing a previously hidden theatrical face of the sun, the entire installation set-up came into view, and the impression that it formed a complete circle in an endless environment turned out to be no more than a reflection created by mirror foil that ran the entire length of the ceiling and was supported by aluminum frames. On closer inspection, the fog was also revealed to be artificial in origin by the mechanical nozzles that blew it out.” Tate blog, “Remember the Weather Project?” 13 August, 2013, excerpted from Marcella Beccaria, *Olafur Eliasson* (Tate Publishing). Online at <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/the-weather-project> Accessed August 2018.
- 8 *Northwest Passage*, 2015 proposal from Studio Olafur Eliasson.

Caroline A. Jones is Professor in the History, Theory, Criticism section of the Department of Architecture at MIT. She studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular focus on its technological modes of production, distribution, and reception, and on its interface with sciences such as physics and biology. Jones has also worked as a curator, notably at the MIT List Visual Arts Center: *Sensorium* (2006), *Video Trajectories* (2007), and *Hans Haacke 1967* (2011). Her publications include *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (1996/98, winner of the Charles Eldredge prize), *Picturing Science, Producing Art* (co-edited, 1998), *Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art* (as editor, 2006), *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (2005/08), *Experience: Culture, Cognition, and the Common Sense* (co-edited, 2016), and *The Global Work of Art* (2016). Her current research collaboration with historian of science Peter Galison examines patterns of occlusion and political contestation in seeing and unseeing the Anthropocene.

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About Public Art at MIT: MIT’s Percent-for-Art program allots funds to commission or purchase art for each new major renovation or building project on MIT’s campus. The program was formally instituted in 1968 and continues to be one of the most active Percent-for-Art programs in the country.

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ALL UNCAPTIONED IMAGES:
Olafur Eliasson, *Northwest Passage*, 2018.
Stainless steel, LED lights, diffusers.
Courtesy the artist. Photo: Anton Grassi.