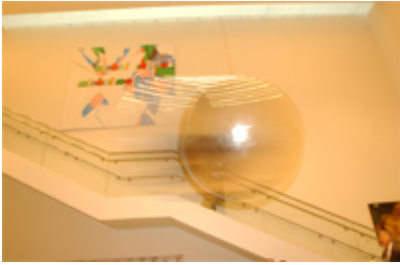


December 2007
Meredith Malone



Olafur Eliasson (Icelandic, b. Denmark, 1967)
Your Imploded View, 2001
Polished aluminum, 51 3/16 " diam.
University purchase, Parsons Fund, 2005

At fifty-one inches in diameter and 661 pounds, Olafur Eliasson's *Your Imploded View* (2001) appears upon first glance like a massive wrecking ball, menacingly suspended just a few feet above the heads of all who pass through the Museum's atrium. When set in motion, the tension increases as the aluminum sphere moves rhythmically on a north-south axis, inducing sensations of surprise and trepidation among those individuals in close proximity. In addition to its kinetic and temporal character, the sphere's uneven and reflective surface distorts the surrounding space, creating new images of the Museum environment and engaging the viewer in an active dialogue with it. Central to all of Eliasson's work is the experience of the viewer. What the artist is after is "the self-reflexive potential in art: our ability to evaluate ourselves in our surroundings."¹ His oft-recited mantra "seeing oneself seeing" aptly articulates his ambition for the individual spectator and for society as a whole.² Through a close reading of *Your Imploded View*, this essay will examine the various implications of Eliasson's call for a proactive subject, including his principal belief that heightened awareness of the subjective character of

¹ Olafur Eliasson, in conversation with Doug Aitken, in *Broken Screen: 26 Conversations with Doug Aitken: Expanding the Image, Breaking the Narrative*, ed. Noel Daniel (New York: D.A.P., 2006), 110.

² Eliasson admits that his phrase was greatly influenced by California Light and Space artist Robert Irwin's earlier phrase "perceiving yourself perceiving." See Olafur Eliasson and Robert Irwin, "Take Your Time: A Conversation," in *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn, (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 55.

perception may provide a means towards greater social consciousness in everyday life, as opposed to the pacifying effects of mass-media entertainment.

Eliasson's emphasis on activated spectatorship and its implied relationship to active engagement in the sociopolitical arena directly builds upon a long line of artistic precedents including the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy's experiments with light, space, and motion in the early twentieth century, and the Zero group's production of kinetic sculptures and light events in the late 1950s in Düsseldorf. The California-based Light and Space artists' focus on the contingent character of the viewer's sensory experience in the late 1960s and the perceptual investigations undertaken by American artists Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham in the 1970s are also frequently singled out as among the artist's more immediate influences.³ Eliasson's work, like that of his predecessors, explores the ways in which the subject's encounter with his or her surroundings prompts larger revelations about the nature of perception itself.

His debt to phenomenological philosophy has been pointed out by critics and by the artist himself, who often returns to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Bergson, and Edmund Husserl, with whom he shares the conviction that perception is not simply a question of vision, but involves the whole body, and that what one perceives is dependent on being at any one moment physically present in a matrix of unfolding circumstances that determine how and what one perceives. However, rather than presupposing a "neutral" or "universal" subject detached from any specific social context, a point that critics of phenomenological theory have taken issue with since the 1970s,

³ For a general overview of these movements and others see Annelie Lütgens, "Twentieth-Century Light and Space Art," in *Olafur Eliasson: Your Lighthouse, Works with Light 1991-2004* (Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2004), 32-40. Pamela Lee recently explored the historical relationship between Eliasson's work and the California Light and Space movement in her essay "Your Light and Space," in *Take Your Time*, 33-49.

Eliasson emphasizes the nonprescriptive individuality of the spectator's responses.⁴ The greatest potential of phenomenology, he claims, is its ability to introduce an element of relativity and uncertainty into one's routine experience of space and time.⁵

The artist frequently employs the possessive "your" in the titles of his works to emphasize the primacy of the viewers' embodied reception. He intentionally plays on the ambiguity between a singular "your" and collective "Your" that might potentially arise in relation to his work.⁶ Looking at the reflective sphere of *Your Imploded View*, spectators enter into a disorienting experience in which neither subject (viewer) nor object (artwork) can claim dominance, as the two are in fact intertwined. The dings and black pockmarks covering the uneven surface of the work not only highlight the fact that the ball was handmade, but further complicate the distinction between reality and representation. Unlike a mirror where one merely looks at a reflection of oneself, the polished aluminum presents a softened, warped, and thus overtly mediated image meant to heighten our ability to see ourselves seeing the artwork—to experience ourselves from both a third-person and a first-person perspective.⁷

⁴ In the 1970s, with the rise of feminist and poststructuralist theory, phenomenology was criticized for its assumption that the subject was timeless and universal, unmarked by social and cultural determinations that shape one's experience of the world. As noted by Claire Bishop in her 2005 study *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005): "writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and others placed the subject in crisis, dismantling Merleau-Ponty's assertion of the primacy of perception to reveal it as one more manifestation of the humanist subject" (76). Bishop offers a thorough discussion of the history of phenomenological theory in relation to the practice of installation art in her book. See especially pages 48–81.

⁵ Eliasson and Irwin, 52.

⁶ In a recent article in *Artforum*, Caroline Jones astutely compared Eliasson's use of the second-person pronominal as an assembly of differences compelling negotiation in opposition to 1980s postmodernism and the work of Barbara Kruger in particular. Jones states that "where Kruger's pronouns emphasize difference, Eliasson dreams of volitional community, mining English for the unique ambiguity between a singular 'you' and a collective 'You' that might eventually form." See Caroline Jones, "The Server / User Model," *Artforum* 46, no. 2 (October 2007): 321.

⁷ Eliasson speaks of his works as tools that encourage the spectator, "to step aside and think about what you are doing while you do it, as if from an external point of view." See *Broken Screen*, 110. Calling the work a tool also emphasizes the choice that a viewer makes whether to actively engage with a given work or not.

It is important to recognize that Eliasson's art is never solely about private experience, it is also about social interaction. While we see ourselves seeing, we also become aware of others negotiating the same work simultaneously. Through disorientation, *Your Imploded View*, like the majority of Eliasson's works, is intended to expose the degree to which our shared reality is culturally constructed and thus help us to reflect more critically on our experience of it.⁸ While bodily interaction is crucial, the artist also draws attention to the fact that it is not only our immediate corporeal experiences that need to be taken into account, but also our individual psychological states, as "our memories and expectations also have a highly individual impact on how we perceive what we see."⁹ The meaning of the encounter in the atrium is thus deeply relational and constantly changeable, depending entirely on who you are and what you are doing, as well as on the presence of others sharing the same space. The experience can be considered communal, but not universal, as each individual always brings something different to the work.

Eliasson's installations are undeniably popular in their appeal and have received both praise and criticism for their awe-inspiring and generally spectacular character.¹⁰ It could be argued that *Your Imploded View* does little more than playfully alter the gallery space and that Eliasson's critique is so subtle and theoretical that its relationship to the viewer's actual experience of the work is often lost.¹¹ While Eliasson embraces diverse

⁸ Eliasson's essay "Vibrations," published in the 2006 exhibition catalog *Your Engagement Has Consequences: On the Relativity of Your Reality* (Basel: Lars Müller Publishers, 2006), is among his most succinct statements regarding his artistic practice and its larger sociopolitical implications.

⁹ Eliasson, "Vibrations," 62.

¹⁰ This is especially the case for Eliasson's large-scale installation *The Weather Project*, displayed in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in 2003. For an insightful critique of this project, see James Meyer, "No More Scale: The Experience of Size in Contemporary Sculpture," *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (Summer 2004): 220-28.

¹¹ Claire Bishop clearly lays out this contradiction in Eliasson's work. See Bishop, *Installation Art*, 77.

interpretations of his work, he also ardently asserts that his practice is a form of institutional critique. Unlike the grand oppositions staged by earlier practitioners of institutional critique in the 1970s, Eliasson recognizes that the museum and the artist are unavoidably linked and attempts to alter the perception of the institution by emphasizing each visitor's subjective position, for, as he states, "changing a basic viewpoint necessarily must mean that everything else changes perspective accordingly."¹² In the case of *Your Imploded View*, the sphere simultaneously reflects and implicates not only the body of the individual viewer, but also the architectural environment of the Museum, along with the constructed arrangement of artworks hanging on the building's white walls, the bodies of other people negotiating the social space of the atrium, and even the outside world glimpsed through the glass walls that flank the north and south entrances.

Curator and art historian Madeleine Grynsztejn deftly summarized Eliasson's position as one that ultimately sets out "less to deconstruct the museum antagonistically than to embolden it as a place from which to articulate a speculative and critical approach."¹³ In opposition to what he understands to be a dominant trend toward universalized and increasingly standardized experiences in today's consumer culture, Eliasson holds faith in the museum as one possible site "where we can still use our senses to define our surroundings, rather than just being defined by our surroundings by means of the commodification of our bodies."¹⁴ Through both his work and his extensive writings, he challenges the museum to separate itself from commercial venues—to

¹² Eliasson, as quoted in Angela Rosenberg, "Olafur Eliasson: Beyond Nordic Romanticism," *Flash Art* (May-June 2003): 112.

¹³ Madeleine Grynsztejn, "(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the Museum, and Consumer Culture," in *Take Your Time*, 23. In this essay, Grynsztejn offers an excellent analysis of Eliasson's practice of institutional critique and his relationship to spectacle culture.

¹⁴ Eliasson, "In Conversation: Daniel Buren and Olafur Eliasson," *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (May 2005): 211.

preserve an oppositional space, however provisional, for discussion, negotiation, and potential dissent from the prevailing logic of consumer culture. Providing an experience of sharpened awareness, not only of the work of art but also of our position in relation to the institution, is regarded by the artist as a social responsibility. His call for change is not directed at external considerations, but, as exemplified in *Your Imploded View*, at organizing a consciousness of one's perceiving body within the ideological framework of the museum. For Eliasson, purposeful engagement with the world is an ethical imperative, and it is through an intense focus on the subjective moment of perception—the root condition of all subsequent inquiry—that independent thinking and social action become possible.