

OLAFUR ELIASSON

nature inverted



In *Your natural denudation inverted*, 1999-2000, Eliasson uses steam, which is a natural phenomenon in his ancestral homeland, Iceland. But in this installation the steam is piped from the Carnegie Museum of Art's heating system. As the warm steam escaped onto the icy courtyard in the Pittsburgh winter of 1999–2000 it left a layer of ice on the tree's branches. In the midst of a busy metropolis the visitor was suddenly immersed in a distant natural phenomenon. But of course the experience was synthetic, produced by technology. *Your Natural Denudation Inverted* was constructed out of the building's heating conduits, scaffolding, a water supply, and mechanically produced steam.

On the surface one could situate his practice within the landscape tradition and more specifically in the modern tradition, beginning with the attempt by Impressionist artists to capture a specific moment. One thinks here of Claud Monet's haystacks or his Rouen cathedral series. Eliasson uses the immersive theatrical potential of installation to powerful effect so that we actually *enter into the picture*. This notion can be traced far into the history of modernism: his artificial nature reminds one of the long standing fascination with the simu-



of *representations* of nature. At this point Eliasson's seems to take apperception into a Baudrillardian hall of mirrors {Baudrillard, 1994} where the copy becomes superior to the original. By placing the experience of the viewer at the centre of his work Eliasson confronts the dialectic of nature and culture. The question is raised as to whether nature is encompassed by culture (the anthropic principal) or vice versa. Eliasson comments:

I consider the anthroposophic scientists ... to be much too totalitarian in their approach at representing the world. To my mind, they developed a kind of pre-phenomenological idea of the individual, which is created out of some elemental force, so to speak, some fundamental substance. I regard this to be a construction. There is no 'true material'. In principle, I believe that nothing is there before our birth, before our 'cultivation' or cultural education. I strongly believe in cultural influence, that there's only one cultural history. ... Our consciousness is the result of historical experience handed down to us through others.' {checkoutW-WW, 2004}



In an increasingly globalized environment one could take issue with Eliasson's contention that 'there's only one cultural history', of course there are many and they are open to apparently endless revision. One of the critical points about cultural conditioning is that it is 'software' and, in contrast with the hardware of our bodies, and this cultural software can be quite considerably revised. There is evidence of this in the shifts in beliefs and customs evident even over the

of the most brilliant mathematicians and computer scientists to discover its hidden patterns.

In an interview with Maria Morais and Oliver Koerner von Gustorf, Eliasson makes the interesting observations that ‘nothing exists without people. ... our perception of the world has more to do with people than with nature’. One is reminded here of the Zen riddle: ‘A tree falls in the forest, there are no ears to hear it. Does it make a sound?’. The tree can produce pressure waves in the air but sound only exists in the consciousness of an animal such as a dog, horse or human being. The point of the riddle must be that sound is not so much a reflection as a *translation*, and it is perhaps at this point that we can understand Eliasson best. The process of representation, such as perception, always creates something else, it adds another dimension to phenomena thereby accumulating the complexity of phenomena, rather than reducing it. This is why culture will never succeed in ‘mastering’ nature in a reductionistic manner.

Another commentator observes that when Eliasson states ‘nature is a product of civilization’, or that Iceland’s lonely landscape ‘has already been reproduced’, what he means is that we look at every environment through the lens of our social conditioning {O.K.v.G 2004}. But it is also the case that our mental systems are resistant to overconditioning. A new and disorienting environmental experience enlivens our innate curiosity, whereas the habitual rut can drive us to despair. New experiences activate our ability to *adapt*: an extremely fundamental evolutionary facility.