

LANDSCAPE & IMAGINATION



*Towards a new baseline for education
in a changing world*

Conference, Paris 2 - 4 May 2013



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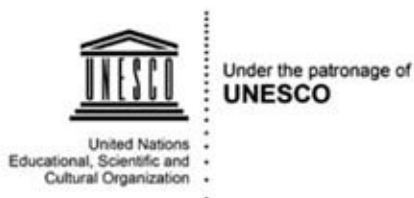
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Front Cover Photo: Valentina Cattivelli
(UNISCAPE People's Landscapes Photo Competition 2013)
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C. Newman, Y. Nussaume & B. Pedrolí (Eds) 2013: *Landscape & Imagination: towards a new baseline for education in a changing world*. Conference, Paris 2-4 May 2013. UNISCAPE, Florence / Bandecchi & Vivaldi, Pontedera. 720 pp.

ISBN: 978-88-8341-548-7

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Viale Pieraccini, 15 - I-50139 Florence
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Art on the Lagoon: Eliasson at the Biennale Of Venice

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Abstract: The Biennales of Venice are not limited to exhibitions in national pavilions. Every year artists and architects choose to confront the site and more specifically, the lagoon. In the edition of 2005, the artist O. Eliasson proposed an installation (*Your black horizon*, 2005) where the visitors left the wide expanse and intense light of the lagoon to enter a darkened enclosed space with subtle light effects. These aesthetic experiences enhanced the visitors' perception of light by changing the usual spatiality and temporality of colour. We will analyze the role of memory in the rite of the visit, and look at how the museal strategies of the artist create a play with spatial memory and sense of orientation in relation to the outdoor space of the lagoon.

Keywords: Eliasson, landscape, art, representation, light, atmosphere.

1. Introduction

A 'landscape' is a figure and a cultural category (specific to a given culture, that a subject shares with other subjects having similar life-styles), that, in any case, can be recognized as a specific cultural figure if it is first understood and felt as a 'perceptive totality' linked to a 'cognitive unity'. In semiotic terms, we can say that "a minimal definition of landscape, outside of any figurative aspect, should retain only three properties: i) a spatio-temporal extension, dotted with categorical intentionality (size, quantity, totality, parts, ...); ii) a subjective aiming onto this composite extension, which transforms it into a "site" for a given observer (actor, space, time); iii) a moment of unity of this ensemble that allows the perceptual intentionality to become an enunciation of the landscape" (Fontanille, 1995).

For example, a photograph or a painting are generally designated as 'landscape' photography or painting when they are understood as a 'view' of an intelligible 'vision' referring to a site.

Today artists 'make landscapes' in quite different ways: they produce artefacts which allow the subjects to exercise their competency in passing from the sensory experience to the intelligible experience of the physical space in which they are immersed; that is, to pass from a phenomenal experience of the space to a personal phenomenology.

In this sense, the contemporary (landscape) artwork is often confronted to the wider genre of objects produced during centuries by local material cultures in order to physically construct the territory; from urban and architectural settlement to road infrastructure and other instruments to be used in the built space. When an artefact acquires a territorial and landscape meaning, the cultural distinction relative to its type (design, engineering, sculpture, architecture), becomes secondary. The typical Venetian "fórcola" – the rowlock of the gondola –, as well as the gondola itself, and the system of wooden "bricole" [dolphins] indicating the waterways in the lagoon of Venice, are artefacts whose teleonomic form took shape with time, as a result of a close negotiation between the natural forces of the site and those of its material culture. These objects keep the 'imprint' of these forces as the memory of many generations, and function as a kind of 'user's manual' of the territory and guide for reading the landscape. They have gained in time a mythical value as symbols – both by metonymy and synecdoche – of the culture of the territory.

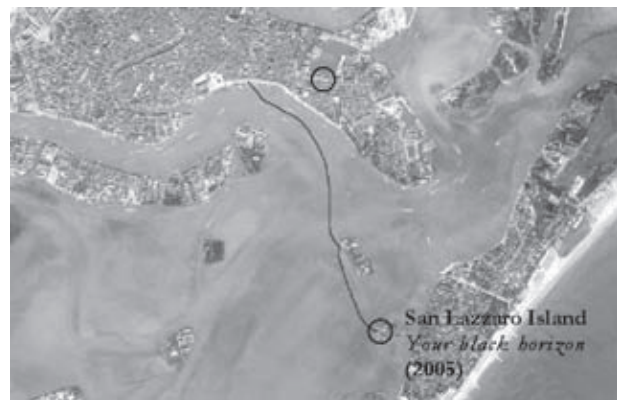


Fig. 1: Localisation of Eliasson's installation.

The contemporary art of landscape does not always have at its disposal the long term continuity of a material culture rooted in a given place. But it tries to replace it during ephemeral timeframes and at the global scale of the art and design market, working with the minimal conditions through which, according to Fontanille, an observer recognizes a perceived totality as a spatial unity.

2. Your black horizon: the space of landscape vs. the space of art

Your black horizon, exposed at the 51st Art Biennale was not originally destined for the lagoon of Venice. Commissioned by the foundation TBA21, it was first an ephemeral pavilion designed by the architect David Adjaye. During the Biennale, it was installed on the San Lazzaro Island (Fig. 1). It was later moved to the Croatian island of Lopud near Dubrovnik.

To reach the San Lazzaro Island, visitors need to take a public transportation boat. The building is located on the edge of the island, from where there is a panoramic view towards the Southern part of the lagoon. From there the space opens up, and the lagoon seems to extend all the way until it reaches the sky. Blue and blue, light and light, meet along a line that can be clearly visible or almost invisible under different specific light (meteorological) conditions.

The installation itself is composed of three elements: (1) a long 'stoa' forming an antechamber (2) a ramp rising to a slightly more elevated level, passing gradually from area of atmospheric light to

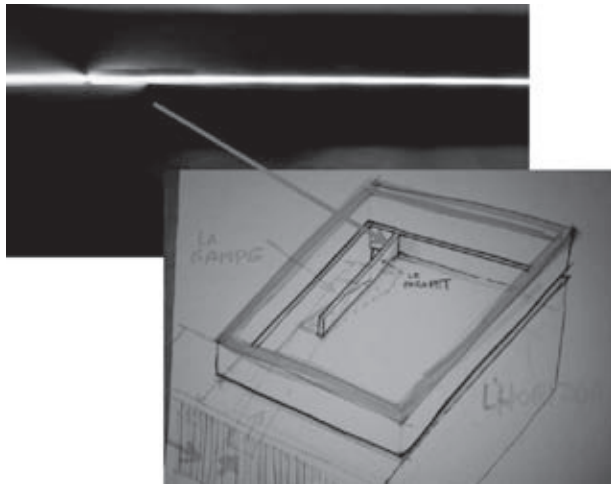


Fig. 2: Sketch of Eliasson's installation.

a dark space; (3) a dark room, only illuminated by a glow of light coming from a straight horizontal slot at the height of the horizon on all four sides.

Entering the inner room through the ramp, one is surrounded by darkness – at first, only the line of light stands out on all side, as with a landscape. It takes some time for the eye to adapt to this darkness – playing with such physiological conditions is one of the characteristics of Eliasson's work – and for the general sense of the shape of the room to become perceptible. At first, one thinks that the line of light comes from the outside, from an open slit on the wall; many visitors go close to the wall to try to look out. But there is no outside: the light (whose source remains hidden) is part of the structure. Not all visitors stay inside the room long enough to notice that the color of the light is changing. Those who find that there is 'nothing to see' tend to leave rapidly. Yet those who remain (even sometimes for an hour or more) and 'take their time' (as the title of a later installation by Eliasson (*Take your time*, 2008) would invite them to do), seeing becomes a different experience. A double movement occurs: on the one hand, the distance between 'seer' and 'seen' disappears; seeing becomes an experience engaging the whole body; yet on the other hand, the 'seer' becomes aware simultaneously of what is seen and of the act of seeing. Thus one never melts into 'seeing' and never becomes one with the act of seeing: perceptual fusion is kept abreast by one's consciousness of one's perception. The gradual change of color and intensity, slow enough to let itself be fully perceived and savored, yet fast enough to remain in one's consciousness, keeps the visitor on the thin and dangerous edge between complete absorption and distancing consciousness. The experience is not that of a one-dimensional line, a luminous cross-section of E.A. Abbot's *Flatland*, but that of a palpable four-dimensional time-space. The 'protemporal' and 'retentional' time-consciousness of Husserl is here made perceptible as a kind of physical-material-perceptual demonstration of a philosophical hypothesis.

The light cycle, continuously repeating, takes approximately 15 min-

utes. The first cycle the visitor witnesses is the time for 'taming' the space and oneself within the space. The following cycles are time of more intimate (abandoned...) perception and increased quest for understanding. The pleasure of the unknown and unexpected (and potentially dangerous – such pleasure is always tinged with a sense of remaining on guard in front of a potential imminent danger) is replaced by the comfortable pleasure of the known and expected, combined with the intense and acute pleasure of the recognition of form. Indeed, what was perceived, seen at first as a luminous line of a certain color in a dark room – a static perception, as the installation appears to those visitors who leave the room quickly – becomes, with the passing of time, a spatio-temporal form, a form of landscape, according to Fontanille's minimal definition. If the time-light cycle is perceived as having a form, that is, does not appear as a haphazard arbitrary juxtaposition of colors, then this comes from the quality of the light itself – the way the color and the intensity evolve, and the speed of the change. It might not then come as a surprise to someone doing further research on the installation (for this information is not available on site) that the light shown through artificial means is a representation (condensed in time, dimension and light frequencies) of another temporal light form: that of the light of a whole day in Venice, from sunrise to sunset. Obviously such 'object of perception' – the day-long changing light pattern of a given day at a given location – has an unconsciously recognized form, essential for the survival of all living species. Indeed, what is called 'light pollution' and is considered a growing problem in the world today, is a disturbance of this natural coherent spatial-temporal form.

Your black horizon appears at one level an atopic installation – an (almost) simple empty box that can be placed anywhere on a small piece of sufficiently flat ground. However, it does interact with its site on several levels:

1) The installation is located on an island, thus integrating the experience of the travel to and from the installation to the experience of the installation itself; indeed, for Eliasson, the way of approaching his work is "part of the show". He makes it particularly clear in the text accompanying his installation *The Mediated Motion* in Bregenz in 2001, where he collaborated with Günther Vogt, a landscape architect "experienced in cultivating motion", "who use[s] the nature of the city to engineer areas in which motion is essential".

2) The installation is facing the open panorama of water and sky; the visual and spatial experience just before entering and just after exiting the installation seems to be its absolute reverse: infinite openness vs. distinct enclosedness, blazing light vs. almost absolute darkness. What is common, however, is the horizontality of both environments: outside the mere expansion of the view of a surface of water and the lack of vertical elements, inside as the only visible aspect or character of the space, in whatever direction one turns.

3) By creating darkness first and then letting in precisely measured light, the installation formulates a negative landscape where one becomes aware of that essential 'material' of any landscape: the light of the day, with its site-specific – that is, place-making – spatial-



Fig. 3: Your black horizon: the space of landscape vs. the space of art

temporal closed form. Coming out of the building, one can (but does not necessarily) notice the lagoon again – this time differently: the lagoon as landscape, water-sky-distant islands-horizon all united into landscape as theater (in Turri's term) by the specific light of the lagoon at that specific moment, light pervading space and time, light not only seen by our eyes but incorporated by all our senses, light giving its signature to a site, turning it into a 'place' recognizable among and distinguishable from all others – this is the lagoon of Venice because this light is not that of the sea and not that of the "terraferma", but precisely and unmistakably that of the lagoon..

3. Light and space

One of the aims of the pavilion was also to stimulate spatial and luministic cognition of a space for a wide audience (the light is the signifier, the space is the meaning).

The title "*Your black horizon*" is a reference to the negative afterimage, superposed to the horizon of the lagoon, which visitors may sense when exiting the pavilion: essentially the installation produces a reversal of the image of the horizon. At the entrance, the purpose of the pronaos wall with its vertical slits, like the pinhole glasses of Bates, is to accentuate the figure of the perceived natural horizon, while the horizontal slit in the black room chamber is first perceived as relating to the outside, as if cut into the wall (and which, in the visitors' experience, can be superposed to the image of the perceived horizon) in the axis of the sheaf of light planes penetrating from the outside.

In reality, the light coming from the horizontal slit is produced artificially by a system of LED, but in terms very similar to the natural source that the light simulates. In fact, it reproduces the variation of illumination and medium average tonality of the atmospheric light during a summer day in the lagoon, from 4.00am till 22.00pm. The variation of light is accelerated into a cycle of approximately 15 minutes; every minute of daylight corresponds to less than a second in its representation inside the pavilion, in such a way that this acceleration makes the chromatic transition of daylight perceptible, and the repetition allows one to better memorize its chromatic stages. Naturally the visitors are aware that they are witnessing a measured

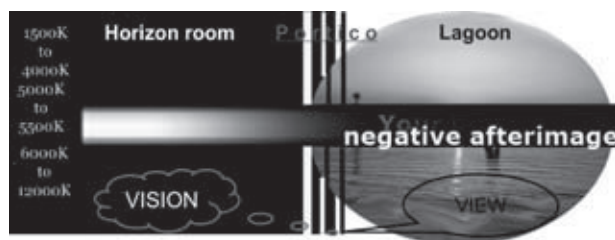


Fig. 4: Chromatical competency.

representation. As Andreas Spiegl says, "... the measurement of the daylight spectra of the outer space defines the spectral displacement of the inner space. What appears on a technological level as a communication between nature and artificiality is actually a translation of the metamorphosed phenomenon from pure information about nature itself. In this sense the 'measurability' referenced here would be the horizon of nature" (Spiegl, 2008).

Therefore Eliasson's device functions as an experimental machine (in a quasi-scientific sense), which tests the perception and the cognition of the observers, presupposing their capacity to see *themselves seeing*. For Eliasson, it is a fundamental aspect of his work:

"if the public gets involved in a stimulating situation, the situation 'commits itself' in return. There's a reversal of subject and object here: the viewer becomes the object and the context becomes the subject. I always try to turn the viewer into what is on show, make him mobile and dynamic" (Eliasson, 2002).

By some aspects this experimental machine resembles the device used by Brunelleschi in the first part of the 15th century to demonstrate that perspective can be congruent to the real spectacle offered by direct monocular view (Manetti). Both devices force the spectator to follow a protocol of use, a theatrical rite. They are visual experiments 1) which are variants of the camera obscura, and 2) in which the eye of the spectator is itself part of the experiment. While Brunelleschi's experiment consist of a projection from one point which will give birth to the renaissance perspective and to photography, Eliasson's consists in the projection of a straight line – an axis of a sheaf of projecting planes, which gives shape life to a chromatic and temporal representation of the atmospheric space.

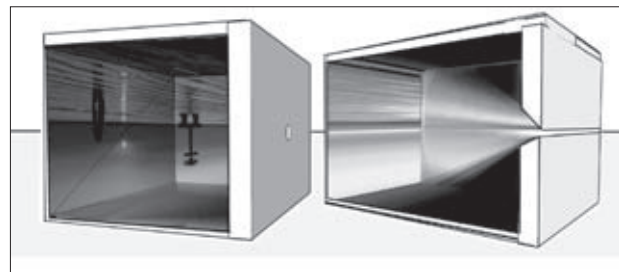


Fig. 5: Camera obscura vs. Your Black Horizon

4. Perceptual economies

There is a further interpretation on Eliasson's landscape depiction works: they act as a sort of critical device for landscape representation. In its essence of a stenopeic machinery, *Your black horizon's* apparent goal is to select and interpret some of the pervasive objects constituting the Venice lagoon landscape: horizontal planes, vertical lines, anthropic and non-anthropic interventions need continuous processes of analysis to be represented by an essential form.

Here everything has been represented through a process of re-drawing by the medium of light. This appears to be a double-sided operation: while some constituting materials of landscape are selected and extrapolated as the main object of representation, some other materials are discarded as not functional to the representation practice.

The landscape is conceived as a piece whose visual nature is intrinsic, as it is the part of the territory subtended by the eye of the observer. Although a virtual *simulacrum*, the horizontal device used by Eliasson, is placed to eye level in a dark room. Visitors are immediately immersed in an environment showing a gap between what is visible and what is not. Representative material in the lagoon are thus reduced to the contact line between sky and water surface by a series of bright and colorful LED lights with a strong visual connection with the natural venetian light during the vivid summer Biennale days. The blades of light within the pavilion's walls exclude any sign that is excessive according to their representational goal. When one looks inside the pavilion, the endless boats, bell towers, wooden poles populating the landscape of the Venetian lagoon disappear; the observer is thus allowed to develop a full interpretation of landscape without the distraction of an over-interpretation of

issues. The caption of the peculiar rarefaction of the lagoon horizon reveal the relationship between the representation device (the blades of artificial light in the exhibition space) and the represented object (the real horizon); the visual representation of the landscape emerges as the only mechanism able to provide the viewer with visual and chromatic competencies.

According to the recent development of landscape tools, an over-description of objects and materials –physical, economic and social – has paradoxically impoverished landscape figuration in recent decades. Eliasson's attempt is to provide an essential experience in which the horizon is reduced in terms of space and color. The pavilion in San Lazzaro also evolves – through a sort of updated renaissance machinery – the Black Box space, one of the *topoi* of contemporary museology. This is a dark environment in which a series of art objects (here, Eliasson's light segments) is exposed in a theatrical way, the darkness acting as a neutral background meant to isolate the subject.

Moreover, the contrast between a dark environment and a source of light perpetuate the logics of sacral space, as it was in Tate Modern's *The Weather project*, 2003, in which the central space of the gallery took the form of a aisle of a church. The radiant lights in both installations outline a relationship between external and internal space otherwise absent.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents three interpretations of an installation: 1) its relation to the space in which it is located, 2) its construction and function as a representational device, and 3) its role as a critical device. These three interpretations exemplify the possibilities for dialogue opened by Eliasson's installations.

In our paper, we have tried to delineate two minimal conditions presupposed by this symbolic correlation. First – indexically - these artifacts appear as witnesses of the salience of the interplay of natural forces (light, materials); secondly – morphologically – they

summarize perceptive heterogeneity in a unitary consistence, in a form. Thus the role of apparently marginal – decorative – aspects is brought to light, in relation to the institutional functions of these objects. This shows the importance of their formal surplus, which became necessary when it is incorporated into the concrete and ritual experience of a territory.

Experiencing this installation is not mystical and does not require adhesion to any esthetical or metaphysical faith. As such it is different from other art pieces working on the ritual meaning of light and of architectonic space (such as those by Tadao Ando and James Turrell). If, however, Eliasson's oeuvres point in some ways towards a mystical experience of the landscape, it is because they appeal in a new way to our esthetic (physiological and physical) competencies about the atmosphere of a territory, thus enriching our cultural experience of the landscape.

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