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Exhibition Review

Olafur Eliasson, *Life*

Fondation Beyeler Basel, April–July 2021

To enter the park of the Fondation Beyeler, a renowned museum in the outskirts of Basel, Switzerland, is to be immersed in a different world. Outside, people are busy getting home after work, chatter and traffic noise fill the air. But here, on the spacious grounds of a museum exhibiting modern and contemporary art, everything and everyone seems to calm down and begin to listen – to the humming of the bees and the wind in the trees, and to themselves. It is very quiet, the atmosphere is almost devotional. People walk at a measured pace across the great lawn towards the building. The spiritually charged environment reminds me of past church visits. A museum as sacred space? Transcendent aesthetic experiences in a profane ambiance? Transgressing predetermined constraints and borders – be it on an ideational, normative, or physical level – is a recurring subject of the Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson's exhibition *Life*, which was held at the Fondation Beyeler from April to July 2021.

Of Borders and the Big Picture

Eliasson's *Life* not only questions the concept of borders, it also exceeds them constantly and on different levels. In the view of the artist, borders are unnecessary and constructed.¹ *Life*, this specific time span, can be controlled only to a certain extent. It changes constantly, confronts us with unpredictable obstacles, new perspectives and experiences. It is not just "our"

1 Eliasson explains his approach and the goals of the exhibition in a video at <https://is.gd/g64tzn> [accessed 19 November 2021].



Fig. 1: View from the lawn of the exhibition inside and outside the Fondation Beyeler, Basel. © Natalie Fritz

life; it is coexistence with other human and non-human beings, with nature. In this sense, the question “What is a human life?” cannot be answered without including all that makes human life possible, without seeing beyond one’s nose. We should have learned that in the time of the pandemic.

Thus, this exhibition does not provide the visitor with ready-made images, photographs, or artworks, but opens a space to create art as a part of one’s own imagination and to perceive life in a new way.

The first sight of the museum’s re-designed park is already overwhelming: the lime-green pond reflects the warm light of the evening and the water spreads from the park into the rooms of the museum, which are empty now, except for water, plants, air, and light (fig. 1). The Fondation’s management removed the glass front of the building specifically for this exhibition. Now open to the outside, the museum and its grounds provide space for flora, fauna, and humans to coexist. Wooden footbridges lead the visitors from the outside in and vice versa (figs. 2 and 3). The exhibition has no opening hours but is accessible 24/7 – for life does not rest! A lifestream



Fig. 2 and 3: The wooden footbridges over the lime-green water that floods some of the exhibition rooms of the museum. © Natalie Fritz



Fig. 4: Inside and outside blur, nature and culture come together. © Natalie Fritz

for virtual visitors was provided by the Fondation on the exhibition website².

In this space, life can circulate whenever and wherever it will. “Life” is the title of this exhibition, but it is also an experience generated by the artwork, the surroundings, and the visitor alike. The visitors bring life into the exhibition by seeing, hearing, and, finally, transforming their impressions into mental images. Thus, the exhibition itself lives, because the “rooms” no longer function as exclusively human shelters, having become a biotope or natural habitat for all that is alive, day and night. For what is our planet other than an “animated room”, a place that provides shelter and a basis for various life forms (fig. 4)? The exhibition in fact lives without our assistance. As visitors we soon get the impression that we are just a small part of this ongoing rhythm of coming and going, of growth and decay.

2 <https://life.fondationbeyeler.ch/> [accessed 11 November 2021].

Eliasson knows very well how to communicate his visions by stimulating the audience's senses. For the artist, "life" means not only human life, but also the whole ecosystem of the planet. The exhibition makes perceptible that we are a tiny part of this big picture, and that the borders we define, the spaces we construct, do not help us be part of it. This experience is also an invocation to act – especially regarding climate change. It is true that Eliasson, who as a child spent most of his holidays in Iceland, feels very connected to nature, but it seems simplistic to reduce his artistic vision, his approach to life, to just his Icelandic heritage. With his team, the Studio Olafur Eliasson, a collective of people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives, he develops artworks that rethink humanity, art, and space from a very elemental and elementary point of view.³ Even though Eliasson's art is currently reaching many people because of the timeliness of these subjects, he does not follow an ecocritical trend. He has always been interested in how human beings perceive and transform space, light, water, movement, and everything that comes along with them.⁴

Experiencing Art

Life makes us understand the importance of "banal" things like light, air, and water. Do we value them in our everyday lives? Do we know that we are absolutely dependent on them, that we could not exist without them? It is impressive how the composition of the exhibition raises our awareness of these fundamental aspects of our lives and of life as such – because we can see, hear, touch, smell, and even taste them. Maybe this is why Eliasson's art is so incredibly successful: it is accessible for everyone, it has no elitist aura. The only requirement for a visitor is to be open to becoming involved in the œuvre.

As I look at the water lilies swinging softly on the lime-green surface of the pond, Rudolph Otto's famous description of the experience of the numinous as radically different from everyday experiences comes to my mind. The numinous is fascinating, merciful, and terrifying all at the same time because it is so powerful. One may experience such a transcendent insight

3 See Eliasson's homepage: <https://olafureliasson.net/> [accessed 6 December 2021].

4 See the exhibitions listed on <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/exhibition> [accessed 19 November 2021].

here, where one is forced to perceive life with all one's senses and in all its beauty.

Critics argue that Eliasson's art is simply too beautiful and thus too superficial to be art. They claim that Eliasson's success is due to the popular appeal of his works, they reach (too) many, not just a knowledgeable minority. The artist replies to such comments: "Sure, market and commerce tend to use beauty to increase profit, but I think that we as artists should reconquer beauty from commerce."⁵

Responsibilities

Light was at the beginning of life. God made it on the first day of creation, as the first chapter of Genesis tells us (1:3–5). Light is elementary in many religious traditions, for it often functions as a symbol of life. In Genesis, we see that on the second day water was made. On the third day, God created plants, and then animals. On the sixth day, God made humankind and gave them "dominion" "over every living thing that moves on the earth" to subdue them (1:28). Olafur Eliasson's *Life* forces us to rethink the terms "subdue" and "dominion", to rethink our position in the circle of life, and to evaluate the legitimating power of myths. Eliasson explains,

We should shift away from the idea that humans stand out against the rest of the world. Even though this concept is historically anchored through scientific and religious legitimations and insights. For this concept fosters the exploitation of all non-human existences and of the inanimate nature.⁶

Should "subdue" and "dominion" not rather be understood as "right to use or enjoy"? If so, that right requires a specific responsibility. Surely to use something is not the same as to exploit it? As so-called reasonable co-creatures, we should take care of what has been entrusted to us, shouldn't we? Eliasson's exhibition confronts us with many uncomfortable questions and highlights at the same time that we all are responsible only for our own behaviour and for those close to us, but have we not also a responsibility to the next generations?

5 Canonica/Krogerus 2021, 28.

6 Canonica/Krogerus 2021, 15.

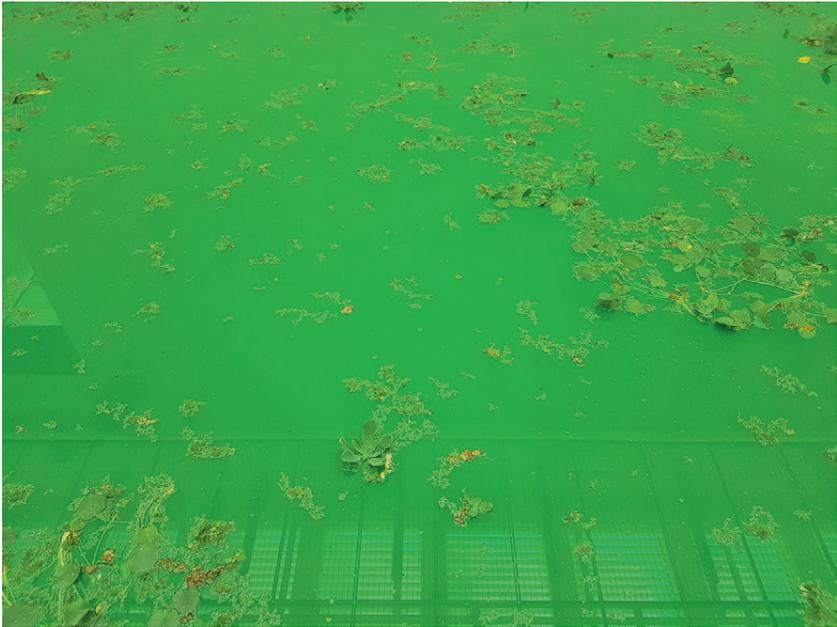


Fig. 5: Plants and the reflection of the skylight in the lime green water. © Natalie Fritz



Fig. 6: Where and when does life come to a stop? Does it ever stop? © Natalie Fritz

The artist offers us a new perspective of life by directing our attention to the fundamental aspects of being as breathing, feeling, and moving. Also, time and space are experienced in a new form – time is of no importance when watching architecture merge with nature, for the water flows very slowly and visitors adapt their pace to its speed as they explore *Life* (fig. 5). The museum itself is no longer a clearly defined space where art is stockpiled and presented. It has opened up visually and materially, and also on a conceptual level (fig. 6). We are aware that we become a part of the museum because the exhibition is animated through us. We become a part of the artwork because we breath, see, feel, and think of it. A multisensorial way of experiencing art.

Paths of Life?

Walking across the footbridges through the exhibition requires some concentration if you don't want to get wet feet. It's up to you which way to turn first, to see where the path will lead you. Maybe you have to turn back,



Fig. 7: Changing and animated rooms – what else is life? © Natalie Fritz

maybe you can follow the path throughout the whole exhibition. Do these boardwalks function as a symbol for our paths of life? We are equipped with free will to choose how we live – but are we really? And then other questions arise: What consequences does our lifestyle have for our environment? Do we live how we would like to live? Is it the journey that matters, not the destination?

Architecture, water, flora, fauna, the footbridges – all elements of *Life* communicate that everything is changing, nothing remains the same. It is fragile, the world we live in, fragile and changing (fig. 7). For the better? For worse? The exhibition and the artist do not answer this question; they just provide us with more to think about. In this sense the artwork increases our awareness of who we are and where we are and highlights the function of art as a sensual possibility to challenge our views and illuminate our blind spots, on a personal but also political level. We are – for a lifetime – part of a culture, an ecosystem, a world. *Vita brevis, ars longa.*

Bibliography

Canonica, Finn / Krogerus, Mikael, 2021, Im Kopf von Olafur Eliasson, *Das Magazin*, 19 June 2021, 8–35.

Exhibition website (livestream not online anymore), <https://life.fondationbeyeler.ch/> [accessed 11 November 2021].