

Olafur Eliasson, Nothingness is not nothing at all, Shanghai, Long Museum

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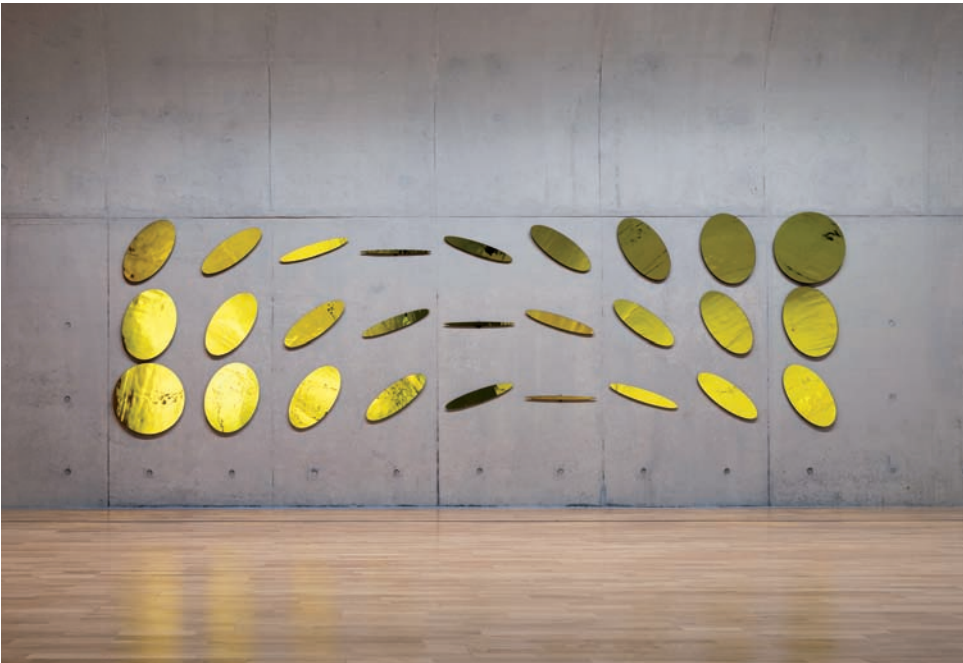
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Olafur Eliasson

← *Meteorological circles*, installation view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2016.

↑ *Bridge from the future*, 2014, installation view, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2016.

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Olafur Eliasson

Nothingness is not nothing at all

There is something alluring about the work of Olafur Eliasson. His excursions into the structure and physics of human perception play off of our desire to distort assumptions about the material world. Eliasson is comfortable creating work at the Kantian border of beauty and the sublime. Using the formlessness of light and color, he creates objects that are not so much freed of form but reflect a visual effort to erase their trace. His work is often seen as a blend of asceticism and scientism—exactitude, distance, and experimentation, never quite shaking its ever too obvious mathematical (Field Theory in action) features. But after a while, symmetry loses its appeal.

In this first survey of Eliasson's work in China, two themes dominate: imprecision and interaction. The exhibition includes well-known pieces that take on new significance in this context. Eliasson's *Beauty* (1993) is composed of elements seen in dozens of other settings: a spotlight on a misty veil of luminescent water in a darkened room. But here other sensory cues give it specificity, namely the distinctive smell of local water (a heady mix of mildew and chlorine). *Happiness* (2011), a long carved out sliver of intense blue light radiating along a darkened corridor, with a perpetual shower of dark, pungent, oceanic bubbles serving as backdrop, features an opening conveniently wide enough for iPhone selfies. Most significant is Eliasson's site-specific installation, *The Open Pyramid* (2016), an enormous steel pyramid that viewers enter under a low clearing. The installation fills the otherwise hollow and cavernous space (designed by Atelier Deshaus) with incredible mass. *The Open Pyramid* amplifies spatial elements of the museum in a direct way, whereas other pieces, such as *Still River* (2016), a series of melting ice blocks dusted with black glacial powder atop stainless steel and plastic, are simply there. *The Open Pyramid* is deceptively austere. The large spotlight shining directly down to

its base illuminates a spot for viewers to snap immortalizing photographs against its four aluminum-mirrored walls, making it clear that this is a monument to our narcissism. Besides, what good is a giant mirrored pyramid without a photo in its reflection? Like some other more famous pyramids, we impose our fleeting digital hieroglyphics and inadvertently expose our ruin. This is Eliasson at play. His experiments are not physics so much as social psychology. We enter his kaleidoscopic world of interaction and meditation, forced to either suspend disbelief or acknowledge the clumsiness of our encounter. Do we look past the guard hiding in the shadows of *Camera Obscura* (1999), her face softly illuminated by a phone screen? Do we ignore the bright red exit signs now incorporated into the palate of Eliasson's work, or do we happily embrace the contamination? This is his genius, and the real labour of aesthetic experimentation. Here is excess, not parsimony. These are seeds of anxiety, not calculated introspection. At any point Eliasson's work might show its seams. Yet the potential for disappointment is also relief, knowing that we no longer have to maintain the fiction of purity. And anyways, sometimes it's nice when things do fall apart.

Todd Meyers

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