

more recent arrivals such as Mike Nelson, John Bock, Spartacus Cherwynd, Luis Jacob, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla.

The MMTA's gambit was realized through thickly applied exhibition design. Although criticized for being heavy-handed, I felt it was offset by the small unifying gesture



Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art
(installation shot), 2008
IMAGE COURTESY OF BARBICAN ART GALLERY
PHOTO: LYNDON DOUGLAS

of painting all the plinths and walls the same colour as the gallery's floor, a very pale grey. Entering the exhibition you were greeted by a large green glowing Perspex box mounted with interpretive text (in English and the Barbican's invented "Martian" language). From this box, you could follow copper strips attached to the floor, which led out into the exhibition spaces and delineated the categories and groupings like a taxonomic tree. For instance, under the heading "Magic and Belief" you find the subcategories "Transformations, Spells and Charms," "Relics and Spirits," and "Icons/Shrines." Obvious references to important exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (MOMA, 1984) and *Magiciens de la Terre* (Centre Pompidou, 1989), as well as some Foucauldian taxonomical mischief are apparent. The MMTA makes use of a mock system of anthropological display, arrangement and normalization to dissolve the clichés of contemporary art, a system that has become so complacent that its absurd tendencies are rarely given a second glance.

The accompanying catalogue is presented as a volume in the *Encyclopedia of Terrestrial Life*. The inside jacket of the book states that other titles in the series include *Land Use, Power Relations, Underwater Architecture* and *Mind-Altering Substances*.

The introductory essay by Tom McCarthy is written in the style of an official report submitted to the Alien Affairs Committee, in which he plays the part of a Martian agent who is able to infiltrate the London art world as an artist and rise to fame. He recounts his adventures as he "mingled with terrestrial celebrities... [and] conducted sexual research all the while bathing these activities in Terrestrial alcohol and powdering them with Terrestrial cocaine." He is dismayed and bewildered by the financial system that supports this frivolous community, noting the "extent of which corruption has hold of this sector of the [art] system cannot be overstated"; he further muses that if the Art Financiers were held to the same level of accountability as the actors in other terrestrial financial markets, "they would have been locked away long ago for 'insider trading,' 'failure to disclose an interest' or a dozen other misdemeanours one could mention." This Martian's fictional rise to fame in McCarthy's text doesn't seem that unbelievable. Consider the speed at which the contemporary art system promotes and equally agrees to forget the line up of one-hit-wonder shows on London's Vyner Street and in New York's Chelsea.

The MMTA made constant use of inside jokes. The interpretive panel for the "Masks" gallery includes an illustration of some Polynesian tribal figures wearing grass skirts and Brian Jungen's *Prototypes for New Understanding* (1998–2005), authentic-looking First Nations masks which the artist fabricated from Nike shoes. Laughter ensues when you stumble upon eccentric wall labels for certain works. For example, you learn of Chris Burden's tarpaulin relic from his *Deadman* (1972) performance, that this covering "seems to have protective properties, it was used to cover and shield the artist from traffic as he lay in the street in Los Angeles. It did not, however, prevent him from being arrested." Normally, I'm weary of a curatorial position that extends itself to the point where artworks are treated as theoretical flotsam and jetsam, but in the case of the MMTA it's a healthy proposition for the London scene, a city with a superfluous amount of contemporary art exhibitions, sensational art marketers and a tabloid-like art press. Because of this, I don't think the exhibition's size, scope and good humour would have been fully appreciated in any other city. Besides, your enjoyment of the exhibition was dependent on your willingness to play along with the curators' interstellar proposition. ►

TAKE YOUR TIME: OLAFUR ELIASSON

Curated by Roxana Marcoci and
Klaus Biesenbach, Museum of
Modern Art and PS1 Contemporary
Art Center, New York

by LEAH MODIGLIANI

Take your time is a grand staging of 38 Olafur Eliasson sculptures and installations at the Museum of Modern Art and PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. Organized in conjunction with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the show brings to a North American audience a large selection of the Danish-Icelandic artist's immersive artworks, which reference nature, weather, perception and the physiological experience of viewing art. These aspects of his work link him to earlier artists such as Dan Flavin, Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Irwin. However, unlike those artists, who primarily made discreet objects and site-specific conceptual artworks, Eliasson acts as the director of a large group of assistants who collectively create multimedia projects for global exhibitions out of his Berlin-based Studio Olafur Eliasson.

At their best, these works succeed in delighting viewers through simple combinations of materials and effects that draw attention to the act of seeing. *Room for one colour* (1997), for example, consists of a long row of ceiling-mounted mono-frequency lights (they look like yellow fluorescent bulbs) that affect human perception so that one sees only black and yellow. Cleverly installed near MOMA's escalators, visitors ascended and descended into and out of colour. The experience of literally seeing differently (perhaps like some animals) and the nostalgic association with sepia-toned photographs suggested by the yellowish-brown light evoked ideas of evolution, time and memory.

Wall eclipse (2004), also at MOMA, is a kinetic sculpture consisting of a hanging, rotating mirror, a bright spotlight on a tripod aimed at the mirror and the resulting shadows that appear on the walls as the mirror turns around. With every rotation, the non-reflective side of the mirror blocks the light beam to create an eclipse of the wall—the mirror's shadow being the exact size of the rear wall. A half-turn later, the light hits the reflecting side of the mirror. In it, viewers simultaneously see their own

reflections, their shadows and the flickering shadow of heat rising from the hot spotlight behind them. In a single installation, a complex series of material effects are manifested through shadows that are engaging on a number of levels and vary depending on where you stand.

Unfortunately, throughout the exhibition, complexity is the exception, not the rule, and basic ideas only elicit simple responses. In *Reversed waterfall* (1998), pumps force water to move up four platforms, and upon reaching the top they drain back to the bottom. The kit-like construction of scaffolding and plastic does not make for an aesthetically rich work of art after the trick of the water's upward motion is detected. *Take your time* (2008), a new work commissioned for this exhibition at PS1, also suffers from a kind of formal laziness that contradicts its own grand ambition. A huge, mirrored disc hangs a short distance below the ceiling and rotates slowly off-axis. The large mirrored surface above viewers' heads, according to the MOMA brochure, is meant to "destabilize your perception of space," but actually fails to do so, because the "perfect" reflection is marred by seams and wrinkles in the mirrored Mylar surface—lines that compete visually with the floorboards underneath. Another installation at PS1, titled *Beauty* (1993), promised that an indoor rainbow would materialize, but none could be seen.

The redundant use of materials like mirrors, tripods and projection lights and the failure of some work to provide the remarkable experiences promised suggests that Eliasson may be handicapped by his own success and scale of production. These

works are designed to be mass-produced and assembled easily by installation crews. Interestingly, MOMA curators Roxana Marcoci and Klaus Biesenbach describe Eliasson's exhibition as an "experimental site, and a laboratory." Given their scale, the team of intermediaries who produce them and the inability of some works to deeply engage the viewer, one can't help but wonder what the viewer's role is in the larger experiment.

These thoughts are perhaps best observed in the ways that Eliasson's *The natural light setup* (2008) quotes but differs from James Turrell's *Meeting* (1986), also on view permanently at PS1. In *Meeting*, an artwork that can only be seen daily at dusk, a large square hole cut into the ceiling of the room appears as a variously changing sky-blue or grey colour field painting. Over time a viewer comes to understand that he or she is looking at the real sky from within the building. The institution of the museum is literally cut out to frame nature, and the viewer completes this "meeting" through time. In Eliasson's work, a huge light box covers the ceiling, simulating the atmospheric colours of daylight that change rapidly over a matter of minutes. This wholly artificial experience is pre-programmed to happen independent of the viewer, and explains why Holland Cotter said in *The New York Times* that if you "stand still, a spectacle will happen."

Take your time has contradictory meanings: on one hand it could be interpreted as a generous and democratic invitation to slow down and reflect on the act of contemplation; on the other hand, it could be seen as an imperative for viewers to

see and behave in specific ways. There is no reason why one shouldn't experience a spectacular event in an art gallery as with movie theatres and other public venues. What remains to be seen is whether Eliasson's particular brand of spectacle has the power to induce long-term aesthetic contemplation and/or changed consciousness after the event is over and his viewers have gone home. ▶

KEVIN RODGERS: THE MYSTICS AND THE PASSIONS

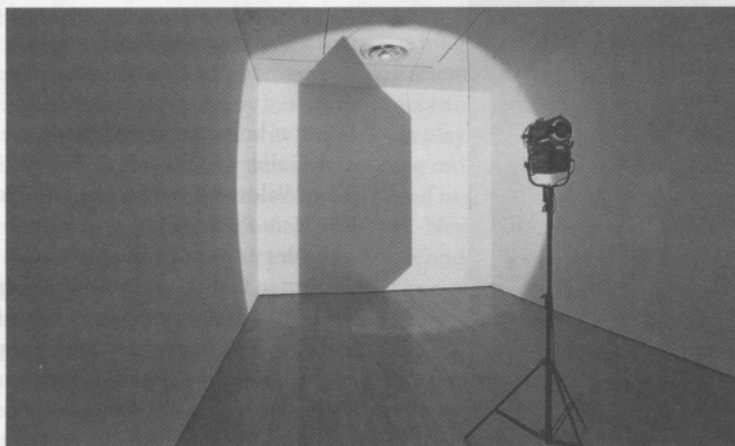
Goodwater Gallery, Toronto

by WOJCIECH OLEJNIK

In March 2007, the United Nations Plaza in Berlin hosted five short talks by Liam Gillick. They mostly dealt with the relationship between politics and art, but also with the proliferation of discourse about art, where this discourse might take place and how it should develop in the future. He explained: "What I think is important to look at...is the question of the experimental, how you can create conditions...to create a productive environment...the worst critique is [to create]...the conditions for the experimental, but no experiment."

The installation *The Mystics and the Passions* (2008) by Kevin Rodgers at the Goodwater Gallery in Toronto is mostly a collection of found objects, crates and miniature models. Like a thrift shop, it houses oblique objects, fashion magazines, old periodicals and dated political posters. One can also find half-empty styrofoam coffee cups, freshly used ashtrays and stacked cartons of empty booze bottles. Such objects indicate human activity, suggesting that just moments before the viewer entered the gallery the space must have been the site of an event and has been vacated abruptly.

On the cover of an old *New York Times Magazine* casually found on the bottom shelf of a wooden, plinth-like structure is the face of a somewhat distraught Jimmy Carter. The cover line reads: "Carter's Vision of America: The President Talks About His Goals For a Second Term." Of course, Carter's goals were not realized; he was never re-elected. However, inside the magazine a plan is drawn for something that never occurred. In these pages it almost exists, a written unwritten history.



Olafur Eliasson, *Wall eclipse*, 2004, Mirror, motor, HMI lamp, tripod, and transformer
dimensions variable, private collection, Installation view at MOMA, 2008,

PHOTO: MATTHEW SEPTIMUS, COURTESY OF MOMA AND P.S.1.

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