

# An Argument Against Timelessness

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It begins with my shoulder. I can feel every single bone in it, my skin like a sheet draped over my acromion, my clavicle. My body seems suddenly a canvas—a frame with fabric stretched across it. I am a structure of posts and string, held taut for the moment but destined to collapse.

This morning, I am caught in an instant of time. Sitting at my tiny living room table, I eat a bagel for breakfast. Each action seems complete in itself: the unfolding of the bakery tissue, the tearing of the bread. I notice the cold at the center of the cream cheese, even though the rest has been toasted. I exist solely in that moment of surprise, and yes, pleasure. The moment is unlooked for, small but encompassing.

It happens all day. On the N train, I am alive in the brushing back of the skirt of my dress. As I walk down the street, my heart beats because of the curves of Cooper Union's arches. This is unusual. I am not thinking about what I need to do in an hour's time, or what I would change if I could live yesterday over again. These typical musings and recriminations dissipate in the smell of ground coffee from a shop on Second Avenue.

Something is going on, something that I want desperately to hold onto, but these moments eventually begin to trickle away. A few days later, I am back to chastising myself for something I did weeks ago, or considering the response to a future project. I have become unstuck from the present, from time, and now I fixate on the shells or projections of it. I write down what I experienced in those special moments of immediacy, because I want to preserve it. I want those moments to be timeless.

It takes a certain technique to pickle such moments for future consumption. It takes a certain craft to bottle these strange wisps of time, a certain skill to save them. Great authors have this craft, great painters too. But what does it take to create these moments? What does it take to destroy the consideration of the past and future, if only for a moment? Can it be done in a shade, in a ray of light, in a piece of sky?

I imagine that I am on a train with Olafur Eliasson (instead of being, in this moment, at Stuyvesant Square), a train somewhere in the European countryside. It is not yet raining, but it will. We sit by the window, drinking coffee that is mostly milk. He is telling me about timelessness. Certain works of art are timeless—the *Mona Lisa*, *The Starry Night*. As images, they have found or been given a particular interpretation. Those pictures have become specific things that will stay forever pure in the collective memory. Thousands of people crowd in front of them, not to engage with them in that moment, but to see in person an image already iconic and familiar—timeless. Eliasson has no desire to create the next *Mona Lisa* or *Starry Night*. He would rather create those temporal moments that van Gogh and da Vinci might once have experienced. Perhaps I bring up William Carlos Williams (or perhaps the man himself joins us), and Eliasson says, yes, yes! Williams's poetry is also strongly moored in time, concerned with catching a second unflattened by the pressure of timelessness. He doesn't spend words on lengthy meditations; he uses words to embody a brief moment. Dapper in his double-breasted suit, Williams begins to read "This Is Just to Say":

I have eaten the plums  
that were in  
the icebox  
  
and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast

Something about his poetry, something about those plums in the icebox, strikes him. ("Forgive me," he adds, "they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold"). To him, small moments are more complete than big ideological complexes that speak of permanence. He tells us (I imagine) that those plums, which were "so sweet / and so cold," are not unlike the cream cheese, the Cooper Union, the piece of sky.

Eliasson agrees. He is entranced with art as experience, not art as object. In "This Is Just To Say," Williams avoids the convention of poetry in his time—the work could well have been a note left on a kitchen table. He writes of a particular moment, of experience that is utterly rooted in time. Eliasson too crafts these moments that only exist for brief flashes. Both men seem to say that experience is something changed by reflection on it.

Eliasson creates work that celebrates the transience of experience by building *installations* that are not representative of plot or story-driven narrative. Instead, they are designed to provoke instant, momentary, individual

reactions. It's there, and then it's not; the moment disappears. This disappearing act happened with *The Weather Project*, Eliasson's 2003 installation in the Tate Modern. For this project, he transformed Turbine Hall into a faux outdoor space using lamps and misters. The lamps, arranged in a giant circle, were meant to evoke the idea of the sun. Eliasson created an atmosphere where we rely on instinct rather than rational thought; people were inexplicably compelled to run through the room or lie on their backs, looking "skyward." In an interview with Eliasson for *artreview.com*, interviewer Sally O'Reilly tells us that "he doesn't consider language the primary socialising agent. His installations and events operate on the audience's sensory perception, prompting not a conversational exchange but a subjective psychophysical experience."

He and Williams find themselves in a surprising agreement when it comes to the question of language. Like the sun in the Tate, Williams's plums are images, not text. Though words may evoke them, they become image. They are not teaching or iconic plums attached to previous interpretations—they don't try to convey a singular impression. They are pictures that allow the viewer to associate and indulge in individual moments. Eliasson acknowledges that his audience will have different reactions to a single piece, but that those differences are a unifying factor. By removing things that dictate meaning, like precise language or historical significance (here, Williams shakes his head and laughs), individual sensory perceptions take their turn at meaning-making. In fact, in Eliasson's latest exhibition, all curator cards bearing titles and information have been removed from the walls.

Not only does language sometimes dictate interpretation, gallery space does as well. Eliasson "points out" that "there is no unmediated neutral state of perception in a gallery, as by definition any aesthetic proposition demands sensory manipulation[;] he tends to expand effect beyond optical or linguistic cognition" (O'Reilly). Eliasson recognizes that museums and exhibitions cannot help but sway the viewers' perception of art. Its presence in a museum contextualizes a piece. We have returned to van Gogh and da Vinci; the lines that fill the Louvre and the cameras that flash in the MoMA change the paintings they surround. *Mona Lisa* and *The Starry Night* are bound by white walls and track lighting. Eliasson rebels against this contextualization—attempting to create a space within museums that frees the work to evoke each viewer's subjective interpretation. He manipulates the gallery/museum to his liking, and brings to the forefront the *viewer's* context rather than the museum's.

Eliasson makes art that takes temporal experience and inflates it. It becomes collectively individual and solid, if only for a moment. He knows that our lives are short and disconnected, but he strives to make “aesthetic propositions” that will make moments of connection heavy and profound. *Room for one color* (1997) is simply an empty, chrome yellow room. In his interview with *Tate Magazine*, Eliasson explains that the yellow is used in Swiss mountain tunnels because the color is “easier for your eyes to detect. The brain has to understand less information than with a whole-colour picture, so we have the sense that we see much more. The yellow room is for me like hyper-seeing, a space where the vision is advanced” (“Captain”). Eliasson gives us a space in which our senses can expand fully. If two people were to walk into the room, each would be more conscious of the other’s body, the other’s imprint in space. Eliasson makes work that binds us together in our subjectivity, in our perception and contextualization of the world he provides us.

Time is present. In a cast of yellow, it flows. If Williams could write a poem about it, I suppose it would begin with the smallness of the color and expand into the instant of sight. The poem would be brief, of course. Perhaps he would write it and leave it on the subway on his way home. Eliasson might even pick it up. He might read it, smile softly, maybe add a word or two. He wouldn’t keep it. He would leave it for the next person to live in, to alter. As our car drags down the rails, I show him artist Hal Foster’s review of a book about “relational aesthetics,” an art that defines itself as “an ephemeral offering, a precarious gift” (Foster). Eliasson does not fully connect himself with “relational aesthetics,” but he likes the phrase. He is a lover of ephemerality, of giving.

In *Art Now* Eliasson discusses his 1993 work *Beauty*. It is a waterfall of mist that cascades from the ceiling onto the floor. The room is otherwise empty. A beam of light projects a rainbow onto the curtain of water. The light creates the ephemera of the rainbow—it is time created, time projected. He tells us not only that beauty is ephemeral, but also that beauty is the creation of ephemera. He says, “The ephemerality is really dependent on your presence. We, so to speak, project the rainbow onto the water. It’s not the sun and the rain, which . . . project the rainbow onto us” (*Art Now*). Being in the same room as *Beauty* is the kind of gift Foster speaks of. In fact, *Beauty* is the room. Like *Room for one color*, the work changes based on other things in the space. Yes, we project the rainbow onto the water, but we also walk through the water, brush it with the tips of our fingers. We create and transform what we see as it transforms us.

Here lies Eliasson's tie to "relational aesthetics," an art movement that has begun to separate itself from the notion of art as object, focusing instead on the interaction between people as the art. Consider the work of Felix Gonzales-Torres. In the contemporary wing at the Art Institute of Chicago, a stack of rectangular paper sat in the corner. About 6/7 of the sheet was gray and the remaining seventh was white. Viewers were allowed to take a sheet and do what they would with it. When someone else asked about it, a conversation would result. That was the art—the conversation. But Eliasson does not remove himself completely from the image. He reminds me of what he said to Sally O'Reilly earlier; he is interested not in conversational exchange, but in the deeper imagistic level of such exchange. There is some switch he has hit upon that combines the aesthetic with the theoretical, the objective with the subjective.

Eliasson finds ways to strike a personal chord in each of his viewers. He conducts surveys, he wants information. He occasionally refers to his work not as installations but as experiments (O'Reilly). His art is not finished when the last light is plugged in. It is an inherently unfinished product—a process—working as the viewers engage with it.

Eliasson does not want his work to be timeless, fixed permanently to certain interpretations. He wants to demonstrate, not illustrate; evoke, not represent. At the Tate, he created a space that elicited each viewer's idea of the sun instead of a more general, universal cliché of it. In *Room for one color*, he shows us thousands of ways to see and understand yellow. *Beauty* is just what it says it is, but it is something always changing. He does not want his work to be stuck in the glue of a finalized interpretation. As we sit in our train car (empty but for myself, Eliasson, and Williams) I find my previous desire to preserve memories fading away. In fact, I am suddenly repulsed by my desire to keep moments like dried butterflies stuck with sterile pins. Like those butterflies, they would never be able to fly again. Preserved memories, plucked from time, can only be gazed at with a critical eye and a sudden wistfulness. They are no longer active, no longer creative. They only exist in a space outside of time, existing to be kept up, polished, promoted as frozen and permanent. They cannot take us to that place where thought and feeling are pure, instinctive, unhindered by received information. They remove us from the instant. But to exist in that instant is all we should hope for, because it frees us from the constraints of the past and the fears of the future.

Since I am still in reverie, I imagine that a door slides open, revealing Virginia Woolf and J. M. Coetzee. The car has become a coterie of language purveyors. Eliasson and I are a little confused. However, we soon get to talk-

ing about images, pasts, and presents. Woolf, irritated by the simplicity of symbol, begins to talk about the nature of images, the meaning of image—it has something to do with the shocking beauty that comes with the collusion of sound, image, and text. What is it about images that can separate us from rational, illustrative words? That is what she asks us. Words she wrote nearly a century ago return to us:

Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? It has speed and lowness; dart-like directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has also, especially in moments of emotion, the picture-making power, the need to lift its burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The likeness of thought is, for some reason, more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available than the thought itself. (271)

She is, of course, still pleased with her ideas. Sipping her tea (it just can't be coffee), she explains that life cannot be contained in only words, in only pictures. There is something to be said for form and image—they get at the truth of a thought in a way that words cannot. As I sit with her, I think that I would like to sculpt this essay, paint it, or install it in the form of warm, dark stones at the base of a waterfall.

J. M. Coetzee, lighting a cigarette that somehow goes undetected (or maybe it is just allowable in this strange train outside time), begins to tell us about his latest novel. It is about a man much like himself, a famous novelist growing older, worrying about the effect his words have had on the world. The man becomes enamored with a young woman in his building, and he hires her as his typist, despite her lack of credentials. This nominally fictional novelist begins to question the very power of language, especially in opposition to the power of the typist's image. He reads to us:

We speak of *the dog with the sore foot* or *the bird with the broken wing*. But the dog does not think of itself in those terms, or the bird. To the dog, when it tries to walk, there is simply *I am pain*, to the bird, when it launches itself into flight, simply *I cannot*. With us it seems to be different. The fact that such common locutions as “my leg,” “my eye,” “my brain,” and even “my body” exist suggests that we believe there is some non-material, perhaps fictive, entity that stands in the relation of possessor to possessed to the body's “parts” and even to the whole body. Or else the existence of such locutions shows that language cannot get purchase, cannot get going, until it has split up the unity of experience. (59)

Woolf nods her head. Coetzee is quite pleased. It's not often one is in the same room with other literary superstars. She is nodding because she agrees, she understands. Language sifts through life, making easily digestible divisions. Language defines, dictates meaning. Image and form do something else. Eliasson understands these thoughts implicitly, although they are framed in words. Yes, language must partition unity in order to exist. Thus, image must always strive to recreate that lost unity. The nature of image is such that an infinite number of associations and feelings can be brought up within it. This is because the complexity of truth is more easily contained in the richness, the wholeness of an image. Images do not divide like the little black lines that cover this page. Images hold a thought without constraining it.

This happens in Eliasson's latest work, entitled *Take your time*. Before he describes it to us, his fellow passengers, he asks us to describe ourselves in words. We comply, with single adjectives and the occasional verb. The words winnow us down to a collection of letters—understandable, simple. Then, of course, Eliasson tells us about the installation. In PS 1's Marron Atrium, Eliasson hung a large, circular mirror from the ceiling. Just as in the Tate Modern five years before, people were driven to lie on the floor and gaze up at their reflections. But this mirror does not pretend to be a sun. It rotates slowly, tilted. Space changes. Those staring up at the mirror are suddenly reflections freed from the adjectives, the verbs with which they once described themselves. Describe ourselves? An image that slowly changes—of course. We are mysterious beings, simply extant. Everything around us—the space, the feet of the security guards, the strand of someone else's hair—reaches us in real time, exists and moves as we watch it.

Eliasson, like all other artists is searching for that “unity of experience.” He is searching for the factor that some call God, or nature, or even science—perhaps it is simply meaning. He believes that unity is bound by time, a time that flows and cannot be stopped. We are not timeless, existing outside of time in fixed and permanent states of being. It is not actually possible to freeze moments and magnify them because we (and the world) are in constant motion. His mirror still spins, leaving us unable to pause and reflect without missing something. We cannot stop the glass to focus on the curious angle of arm or shoulder; we can only note these fluid moments as they pass by. He suggests we indulge these passing moments, live in them, embrace them without stifling them or trapping them within frames. He wants us to let art and experience flow through our fingers like sand, and then pick up another handful. In those grains lies the foundation of what it is to be human and to be mortal. Only by picking up that sand, by staring at the reflections of

friends, lovers, enemies, strangers, can we begin to approach what humanity is in its entirety.

He begins. We begin. I begin, like Williams, Coetzee, and Woolf. We are looking for a way into the totality of existence, with all its contradicting truths and subjective interpretations; we can only get there by playing with ideas that are always altering, just like reality itself.

The train slows down, our coffee is getting cold. Our conversation dies down. The train pulls into a station, and I step off not into the European countryside, but into Stuyvesant Square, where the sun is shining and I am alive only in the simple exchange of pleasantries with another body in space.

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