The Crossover of Site-Specificity and New Media Immersion: Interactivity, "Spatial Experience," and Subjectivity in Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* and Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil*

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My paper today investigates the tendency to describe artworks as both immersive and site-specific. For, how can they be both? Although both terms have solid foundations within art history, they tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive. "Immersion" draws on our relationship to new technologies, as well as a long history of illusionism and simulation, while "Site-Specificity" focuses on actual places as a way to reveal the forces at play in a particular site. Given this difference, my objective is twofold: first to discover their respective usefulness and limitations, and then to ask, what happens when we think of them together? Do they create a new type of space or do they remain mutually exclusive?

Furthermore, running through this paper is a concern for how philosophies of space join theories of bodily subjectivity. As Jonathan Crary has argued, optical technologies, by conditioning viewers to see a certain way, function as the training ground for assuming a certain model of subjectivity.[1] The artists I am considering create models of "spatial experience:" their artworks function like blueprints for ideas about space and ideas about subjectivity, neither of which can be taken for granted.

Let me outline Immersion and Site-Specificity in turn: "Immersion" is a buzzword of the Virtual Reality industry. It refers to experiencing computer-generated stimuli at the expense of an awareness of the actual world—to the extent that the virtual world becomes the source of the real. This ontological relocation is achieved by wearing gear, such as helmets and gloves, which sense the body's movements and alter the data-world depicted on the screen accordingly. Pre-computer immersive experiences include architectural *trompe l'oeils* and panoramas, which equally stress the invisibility of the frame. Immersion is thus defined by the experiential breakdown of boundaries between actual and virtual emplacement, which is not new but is taken to new heights by digital interactivity. For this to happen, the interface must become so natural as to recede in awareness and effectively disappear. As Oliver Grau explains, immersion "is a history of frameless, even immeasurable images."[2]

"Site-Specificity," by contrast, seeks to decorticate the workings of a particular site—whether in literal, functional or discursive terms[3]—in the hopes of rendering the stakes more visible. It is profoundly anti-illusionistic in the sense that it focuses on the interface itself—on the relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the

site. If Immersion has us crawling through the computer screen to merge with the digital world, variants of Site-Specificity make us take a step back to look around at how one world nestles into, or competes with, another. Generally speaking, the objective is to break habitual patterns and conceptions of site, to lift the layers of illusion and stare reality in the face. This so-called "reality" can be concrete or immaterial, but in every case, it is determined by competing frames of reference. As such, in contrast to Immersion, it is intended to be decoded as a medium, not experienced immediately as a site proper allegedly would be.

Given this rather drastic difference in their relationship to the mediating interface, Immersion and Site-Specificity seem like unlikely bedfellows. We can think of them as illustrating the mathematical figure *asymptote*, in which two lines move toward convergence but never intersect. However, due to their current proximity, they created a "crossover," and we have to make sense of the new spaces that have emerged in its wake.

There are several theoretical issues that are of equal concern to both Immersion and Site-Specificity. One of these is the role of interactivity in defining the viewer's position within an artistic space. As critics Dieter Daniels, M.L. Ryan, and A.R. Stone have argued, interactivity has become one of the most effective means to immerse the viewer in the information space. As such, interactive artworks raise important questions about the status of the "self" in a post-human environment and the potential for critical distance in the face of technological immersion.

Today I will discuss two artworks that require the viewer's interaction in order to conceptually cohere. The first is Olafur Eliasson's 2005 project *Notion motion* as it was installed in the San Francisco Museum of Art in 2007-08. Viewers enter the installation through a long dark corridor. The floor is not the usual gallery slick but is overlaid with roughly hewn planks that release their wooden odour and creak underfoot. After travelling down a hallway, a wall-sized screen becomes visible at the back of a room. At first it looks like a video installation, perhaps by Bill Viola. On the screen appear wavelike patterns in black and white. Upon entering the room, these waves occupy the entire field of vision.

On closer inspection (on the cue of a few jumping kids) several raised floorboards become apparent. The rate and force of stepping on them determines the intensity of the wave pattern. The viewer thus determines the image: the screen changes from just a few lines of a long calm frequency to a saturated field of staccato, bright and luminous, if agitated. It is this *interactive* component that changes the work from being thematically immersive to functionally immersive. That is, there is a feedback loop between the image on the screen and the viewer-now-"participant" which binds them together into a new combined entity.

Parallels can be drawn between jumping on Eliasson's floorboards and clicking a computer mouse: both require *purposeful* action as a way of

entering the imaged-space.[4] This analogy points to Eliasson's awareness of the viewers' culturally conditioned ability to project themselves into imaged-spaces through technological mediation. It is this increased aptitude to tele-transport ourselves that Eliasson plays off of in *Notion motion*. Rather than peering into an alternative reality from outside its frame, the viewer is now reflected in the work itself in a narcissistic loop. As the curator Madelaine Grynsztjen states, Eliasson "understands [the viewers'] kinetic involvement in his work as yet another, embodied and maximally individuated, way of seeing."[5]

Specific to this "way of seeing" is the fact that the distinction between the individual viewer's physical movements and the "what" of what they are actually seeing is obscured. Regarding *Notion motion*, Mieke Bal writes, "the artist is invested in keeping viewers actively engaged by the works as long as possible – long enough, that is, for them never to be able to return to an ideological state of separation."[6] To cite the curator again:

> Ultimately *Notion motion* proposes an evocative cancellation of the line along which each body understands itself as apart from its surroundings, a reduction of our estrangement from a new more fully enveloping universe.[7]

In other words, in this room of *Notion motion* viewers are not situated or estranged; they are immersed in the universe depicted on the screen. But the question remains, how can we carve out a position in such an enveloping world?

Eliasson's installation addresses this directly. When we turn the corner to leave the wave-space, we come to an opening onto another room, literally the other side of the screen. Inside is a shallow pool of water with a bright light directed on its surface at a sharp angle. *So this is how the phantasmagoria is made*…. The magic is gone. By revealing the mechanism responsible for the image's generation, Eliasson returns us to the mundane world governed by the laws of physics, concrete nuts and bolts, which are stubbornly material compared to the effects they generate.

In the second room of the installation, we are back on scientific ground where the world is explained (away) by matters of fact—what Nick Bingham calls our most "cherished weapons".[8] "Critique" is the cultural safeguard against immersion. It allows us to step outside the site and see its specifics from an imagined exterior. It protects us from facing, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, "the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and the tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream."[9]

Eliasson relies on the armour of critique and seeks to polish it. He states:

> to step out of ourselves and see the whole set-up with the artefact, the subject and the object – that particular quality also gives us the ability to criticize ourselves. I think this is the final aim: giving the subject a critical position…[10]

So in *Notion motion* there are effectively two different sites, which can be categorized by the terms virtual realism and critical realism, respectively, and the viewer passes from one to the other. This passage is like graduating from Lacan's Imaginary to the Symbolic, or indulging in the sublime only to later master it, or finally stepping out of Plato's cave. In any case, the spell of immersion is broken, and the subject's position is reaffirmed. The only problem is that the viewers' relationship to the frame is not re-negotiated: from this side of the screen, they cannot contemplate their own participation but stand outside it in voyeuristic suspicion.

The second installation I want to discuss is Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* from 2007, which offers a very different model of interaction and spatial integration. The interface he employs blurs the distinction between subjective effects and objective causes. It is as if he is asking what would happen if we could no longer step outside the realm of illusion to obtain the position of Critique; and is there no motivational core to the waves of shifting intensities?

In *Hylozoic Soil*, webs of plastic mesh—made of the latest geotextiles—hang in cave-like formations. Small fern-like appendages furl and unfurl themselves gently. Clusters of fleshy balloons inhabit their lining like barnacles. Geodesic organizations arch overhead to create a porous, provisionary enclosure. As curator Jean Gagnon describes it, "These quasi-plants – all synthetic – come to life in the space, retracting, contracting, slackening and opening as we pass."[11] Beesley has animated standard manufacturing materials with electronics. *Hylozoic Soil* uses sensors and proximity detectors, muscle wires, actuators, and networks of microprocessors, to sense and respond to the viewer's movement.

As such, *Hylozoic Soil* is a *reactive* space. Incorporated into its web, the viewer is put into a feedback loop with its computer software. The feedback, however, is decentralized and seemingly erratic. Rather than allowing the viewer to see a mirror image of her movement in an altered form, like when an elbow corresponds to an extra appendage in a virtual reality, *Hylozoic Soil* responds to our movements in a way that makes it impossible to incorporate its algorithms into our own body. Instead, as Beesley states, this is "an intertwined world that moves beyond closed systems."[12] The boundaries of neither "it" nor "I" are clear in *Hylozoic Soil*'s "extended physiology."[13]

The crux of the issue is that Beesley offers no hope of disentangling them. The question then becomes, what do we get when we integrate them? Or more specifically, what does this mean for subjectivity?

Beesley writes, "Integrity – that is the hardening of boundaries – is a kind of curse. I'm trying to point to disintegrity, or dissociation as offering something vital."[14] *Hylozoic Soil* suggests that the viewer's body outputs and inputs information that exceeds its organization as a singular bounded being. Instead, it merges with the installation in unpredictable

Fig. 1. Philip Beesley, *Hylozoic Soil*, 2007. Image courtesy of artist.

patterns. The viewer's movement, when dispersed throughout the system, becomes sensible by another organ, such as a whisk of air on her skin, for example, or a quiet *click* of plastic parts. It is in this way that *Hylozoic Soil*, as a medium rather than a message, structures an aesthetic experience that reshuffles the senses.

What is at stake in such theories of determinism is subjective autonomy. For example, Jonathan Crary states that the "loss of autonomy, due to the increasing integration of the individual into various electronic networks and assemblages…is a question of the ongoing prosthetic subsumption of the nervous system into becoming simply a relay or conduit amid larger systems and flows."[15] In other words, the subject is reconfigured as a "link" rather than as a "being." As Robert Pepperell suggests, "We can think of ourselves not as isolated agents trapped in a dermal shell, but as boundless clusters of activity blurring into space and time."[16]

In the dynamic combinations that result from this continuous blurring, the viewer's experience of space is loosened from the binaries that usually structure it, such as subject/object, inside/outside, and figure/ground, and dispersed across non-linear patterns of various sensual modalities. As such, *Hylozoic Soil* illustrates what Deleuze and Guattari define as a smooth space and suggests deterritorialization without addressing the need, or inevitablility, of striations and reterritorialization. Following Deleuze and Guattari,

however, "Is it not necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages?"[17] In this light, *Hylozoic Soil*'s dispersal of the viewer through the cybernetic circuit taps into the commercial allure of computer interactivity that makes viewers feel "at one" with their environments—that is, *immersed*—and ultimately threatens the subject with "regression to the undifferentiated."[18]

To summarize, both installations physically integrate the viewer in order to suggest the difficulty of ascertaining site in an era characterized by real-time tele-presence. The ubiquity of interactive technology has drastically altered conceptions of space and place, eradicating distance in favour of instantaneity. Notions of subjectivity have changed in tandem, no longer offering the cohesiveness of Humanist agency but rather emphasizing process and contingency.

In *Notion motion* this cultural shift is depicted by the division of the space into two distinct experiences of the screen, one following the other: the viewing subject flirts with ontological dissolution but then graduates to a position of Critique, which reaffirms her mastery and consolidates her integrity. Eliasson's installation is sitting on the fence, so to speak, between the ideals of Immersion and the ideals of Site-Specificity. The viewer can to- and fro- between diving into the depths and stepping back to see the set-up. However, there is a glaring blind-spot with regard to how we are situated in either site: on one side we are lost in relation to site; on the other we are free of its contingencies.

In *Hylozoic Soil* this shift is embraced for its utopian potential, though the result—subjective dispersal—leaves one wondering how we can possibly move forward. In the spatial experience that Beesley offers, the certainties of a given position (such as a specific "site" or individual "subject") become subsumed in a perpetual process of linkage. Beesley's installation breaks with the distinction between inside and outside and questions the ability of individuals to locate themselves in the networks in which they are immersed. Here dispersal prevents a sense of emplacement.

As such, in two different models of interactivity, these two installations suggest that the culture of immersion is subsuming the premise of site-specificity and turning its criticality of the frame into a formative lingering. If this is the case, many questions follow: How can an artwork open a discursive space within an immersive space, given that immersion is decidedly non-reflexive? Phrased differently, how can an artwork be immersive *and* open a public mode of address? Furthermore, can artists establish a position of critique *within* the immersive, which by definition has effectively obliterated its frame? If so, how? Is "critique" still the *modus operandi* of engaged art today, or has it itself become an obsolete concept?

Notes:

1. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 7.

2. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 8.

3. James Meyer distinguished between "literal" and "functional" sites in "The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity," in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23-37 . Miwon Kwon identified three "waves" of Site-Specificity in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

4. Soke Dinkla distinguishes between Reactive, Random, Purposeful, and Productive interactivity as quoted in Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 205.

5. Madelaine Grynsztjen, "(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the Museum, and Consumer Culture," in *Take Your Time:Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 17.

6. Mieke Bal, "Light Politics," in *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007) 164.

7. Grynsztejn, 18.

8. Nick Bingham, "Unthinkable Complexity? Cyberspace Otherwise," in *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, ed. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (London: Routledge, 1999), 257.

9. Quoted in Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke, "Virtual Worlds: Simulation, Suppletion, S(ed)uction and Simulacra," in *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, ed. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (London: Routledge, 1999), 265.

10. Quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, "Conversation with Olafur Eliasson," in *Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madelaine Grynsztejn, Daniel Birnbaum, Michael Speaks, et. al. (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 21.

11. Jean Gagnon, "Philip Beesley," in *E-art: New Technologies and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: Daniel Langlois Foundation and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2007), 13.

12. Philip Beesley, "Introduction," in *Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations – 1995-2007*, ed. Philip Beesley, Christine Macy, Andrew Payne, et. al. (Toronto: Riverside Architectural Press, 2007), 19.

13. *Ibid*., 20.

14. Christine Macey, "Disintegrating Matter, Animating Fields," in *Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations – 1995-2007*, ed. Philip Beesley, Christine Macy, Andrew Payne, et. al. (Toronto: Riverside Architectural Press, 2007), 33.

15. Jonathan Crary, "Visionary Events," in *Olafur Eliasson* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1997), 7, http://www.olafureliasson.net/publ_text/texts.html.

16. Robert Pepperell, "Posthumanism and the Challenge of New Ideas," in *Hylozoic Soil*, 36.

17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and foreword Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 270.

18. *Ibid*.

Response

Anja, thank you for your talk.

In your essay, you have traced two branches out of minimalism for us: one of site-specificty and the other of immersion. Then you have suggested a new paradigm in which the two merge once again and you have tried to theorize this new space. Within this new space you have given us two possibilities—one where the subject is in control of his immersion and has "critical knowledge" of the mechanism of its production (Eliasson); the other where the participant has no control over his own interaction with his surroundings (Beesley).

So your main question is not so much the shape of this new site but rather the shape of this new subject. My first comment is that this "new" subject that you have presented us with—the subject of Beesley's electro-sensitive environments—is not in fact a new form of subjectivity, but one who was the target of minimalism in the first place. As you have described very nicely in your paper, site-specific art aimed to heighten the subject's attention towards his/her surroundings precisely because s/he was unaware of it, or rather immersed in it, to use your terminology. The well-rehearsed story of site-specific art transforming into institutional critique (as highlighted by Miwon Kwon and others) is one that acknowledges the necessity of this criticality for the subject's "integrity" (to use your terminology once again).

While you have aptly argued for Eliasson's engagement with this history, you have not discussed why the engulfment without criticality, which is what we have in Beesley's work, would once again be an appealing condition for us. To quote from your essay, you have asked in regards to Beesley's work: "what would the world look like if we could no longer conceive of it as such: if we could no longer step 'outside' the realm of illusion to obtain the position of Critique?" The answer to this question, in my mind, is that we already know what that world looks like: it is our so-called on-line shopping "society of the spectacle," our only defense against which is our ability for critique. So my question for you is why would the subject's lack of control over technologies that surround him/her be appealing? I'm just not convinced that Beesley's work offers us the high ideals of "becoming" over that of "being" or even a grey area between immersion and site-specificity. Thank you.

- Sara Mameni, M.A. student, University of British Columbia