

GREEN RIVER (1998) AND THE NEW YORK CITY WATERFALLS (2008)

OLAFUR ELIASSON

During past years, the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson has captured our imagination with his monumental art installations and temporary landmarks of which the best known are *Green river* (1998), *Double sunset* (1999), *The weather project* (2003) and *The New York City Waterfalls* (2008). His oeuvre is a trajectory of rainbows, sunsets, waterfalls, mist, smells, light rays and kaleidoscopes. His work is often architectural and most of the time critical of consumer society but always highly enjoyable, and never cynical.

Olafur Eliasson is a master among installation artists: planning and directing complex undertakings in which he not only sets the conditions for viewing or experiencing but also the particular impact these conditions will have on those subjected to them. Experience is a key word in all his undertakings: with beams, colors, waves or tidal mists, Eliasson captures our imagination through an active engagement in the spatial situation and a reintroduction of temporality.

The underlying critique often addresses the museum-like character of our inner cities and public spaces and the impotent public space some of our musea or exhibition arenas tend to be. Therefore, Eliasson introduces natural elements like light, water, fire and wood in unexpected ways and locations. A waterfall beneath Brooklyn Bridge, a sunset that remains visible 24/24 in the city of Utrecht, a floor of lava in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, a moss wall in a museum, six tons of glacier ice in a gal-

lery... All complex undertakings to develop, yet simple perceptions that leave a strong imprint on our mind and become memories for the future.

In 1998, during his IASPIS (International Artists' Studio Program) residency in Stockholm, Olafur Eliasson had the idea of coloring the downtown district of the city. This was not an official project so he had to act fast and efficiently. One Friday at noon, he emptied a bag full of red powder over the parapet of a bridge into the river. The wind swirled it into a red cloud but when it touched the water, the river turned green. The colorant was harmless and caused no pollution. But for about three hours people stopped and stared, and the next day the story was splashed across every front page of the newspapers. 'Green river' beautifully links up to a tradition in Chicago where, since 1962, the Chicago River is dyed green to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Just as the Chicago River is made very visible each year for a couple of hours, Eliasson made the city of Stockholm visible to its habitants by connecting public space with the people, breaking through the way representation and iconography influence our senses and our habits of seeing. The anonymity of this event made it work and kept it informal. Similarly, he challenged the institutional setting of the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997 where he was invited to show a series of photos but instead found a small rainwater reservoir and decided to empty it. The Biennale curators were unaware of this until water began running through the streets and the city for more than a km. *Erosion* was again a simple neutralizing of preconceived notions of what a Biennale, an institution, a city, a public space and art should be.

One of Olafur Eliasson's projects seamlessly fits into the global debate on water problems and possible future solutions: *The New York City Waterfalls* from 2008. Olafur's Artist's Statement sums it up concisely:

"Water is everywhere – and it is everywhere necessary. More than 50% of our body mass is made up of water. We drink it and use it repeatedly throughout the day. When water flows down the East River, we tend to see it as a simple surface, framed by a neutral urban waterfront. By elevating it into waterfalls, I wish to amplify its physical and tangible presence while exposing the dynamics of natural forces such as gravity, wind, and daylight. My idea is to encourage people to identify more with the waterfront of

New York City; this is a call for the revitalization of areas that until recently have been under-utilized as creative and recreational spaces because people have focused primarily on the interior grid of the City. There is a huge unrealized potential waiting to be explored and this is located right at our feet.

Waterfalls are great natural phenomena. I like them because they are easily recognizable and everyone has memories of them. By creating the group of four waterfalls within the New York cityscape, I want to emphasize the value in seeing nature as a construction. The structures themselves consist of everyday, industrial materials: scaffolding, which is the backbone of the structures, and pumps, which bring the water from the East River to the top. The water then falls down from heights of 90 to 120 feet back into the river. They are as real as any waterfalls; it is real water falling. The scaffolding supports are clearly visible and may be recognized as the same as those used to build New York over the past century. My point is not to re-initiate the discussion of nature versus culture or the natural versus the artificial, but both to open up the possibility of a nature-based experience within an urban setting and allow us to reconsider our experiences of nature.

Waterfalls are often associated with extreme natural forces; they function as magnificent backdrops in movies, literature and art. They may, on the one hand, convey a feeling of powerlessness or insignificance, but they can also strengthen our relationship to the landscape while enhancing our feeling of being sensing subjects. With *The New York City Waterfalls*, I want to focus on the waterfall as a spectacle, operating on a grand and impressive scale, while also offering an intimate and intellectually challenging experience to the people visiting the sites along the waterfront.

In developing this project with Public Art Fund, and in collaboration with the City of New York, I have tried to work with today's complex notion of public spaces. The Waterfalls appear in the midst of the dense social, environmental, and political tissue that makes up the heart of the City. They will give people the opportunity to reconsider their relationships to the spectacular surroundings. I hope to evoke experiences that are both individual and enhance a sense of collectivity: the Waterfalls will invite people to explore them on their own, but due to their size and locations, they will also gener-

ate expectations, opinions, and actions that can be shared. This relationship between individual experiences and the social context is crucial for me. I believe that by seeing a work of art – a waterfall, for instance – we become co-producers of the work and its social context. Taking part in this type of collaboration requires that we take responsibility within the city that we live.

In my generation, the need for the development of sustainable energy has become apparent, and here water in all its forms plays a central role. The use of hydrogen, for instance, is being researched and may facilitate a more responsible interaction with the environment in the future. I believe that we need to make nature tangible and relevant to people in order to add clarity to the discussion of natural resources. *The New York City Waterfalls* is an attempt to synthesize and amplify all these questions regarding the environment, politics, urban planning, responsibility, education, and natural phenomena within a single work of art – and all in relation to the iconic shoreline of New York City.”

BIO

OLAFUR ELIASSON (born 1967 in Copenhagen, Denmark) is a Danish-Icelandic artist. In 1995, he established Studio Olafur Eliasson in Berlin, a laboratory for spatial research. Eliasson represented Denmark at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 and later that year installed *The weather project* in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London. Eliasson has engaged in a number of projects in public space, including the intervention *Green river*, carried out in various cities between 1998 and 2001; the *Serpentine Gallery Pavilion*, London, a temporary pavilion designed with the Norwegian architect Kjetil Thorsen in 2007; and *The New York City Waterfalls*, commissioned by the Public Art Fund in 2008; *Your rainbow panorama*, a large circular coloured-glass walkway situated as a beacon on top of ARoS Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, opened in May 2011, and Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre, for which Eliasson created a crystalline façade in collaboration with Henning Larsen Architects, was inaugurated in August 2011.



Green river, Moss, Norway (1998)

© Olafur Eliasson, 1998



The New York City Waterfalls (Governors Island) (2008)

Commissioned by Public Art Fund

© Olafur Eliasson, 2008

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The New York City Waterfalls (Brooklyn Bridge) (2008)

Commissioned by Public Art Fund

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Melting ice on Gunnar's land (2008)

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