CHAPTER 5

Ice Art Ethics: On Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch*

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Abstract: On the occasion of the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change in 2014, a rather unique clock was installed in front of the Copenhagen City Hall. Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014–2019) is an ecological artwork that aims to raise awareness about climate change by engaging its audience. The artwork consisted of twelve enormous ice blocks installed in the shape of a clock. Drops of water slowly dripped to remind the audience of the precarious situation that our planet is currently in. This chapter addresses and explores the paradoxical nature of ecological artworks, with Ice Watch as a case study. By drawing on Arne Næss' concept of deep ecology and Donna Haraway's call for 'staying with the trouble', this chapter explores whether anthropocentrism can truly be criticised by ecological artworks.

Keywords: deep ecology, installation, ecological art, anthropocentrism, climate change

Introduction

'The clock is ticking' is a phrase often used when referring to climate change. This phrase reminds us of the precarious situation that our planet is currently in. Each second in which we can make a change in order to save our planet counts. In front of the Copenhagen City Hall, a rather unique clock was installed in 2014 [figure 1]. The ticking of the clock was not due to the actual ticking sound produced by the clock workings, but rather the passage of time was represented by drops of water slowly

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Figure 1. Olafur Eliasson. (2014). *Ice Watch* [twelve large ice blocks installed in front of the City Hall in Copenhagen]. neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

dripping from twelve ice blocks which were installed in the shape of a clock.

Each person passing by was invited to touch or taste the cold and melting surface of the ice blocks [figure 2]. This haptic sensation brought the audience in direct contact with the decay of large ice blocks, which were removed from their natural habitat in Greenland and transported to Copenhagen [figure 3]. On the occasion of the installation of this conceptual clock, the following was uttered: 'Art can engage people, far better than science can. Science is fascinating, but art can touch something inside us which is hard to describe' (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014c).

Those were the words of geologist Minik Rosing, who created the artwork *Ice Watch* in cooperation with Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. The 12 ice blocks represent, as Eliasson describes, an 'ice parliament. A little parliament of ice, who [sic] needs to agree on something' (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014c). *Ice Watch* was installed on the occasion

Figure 2. Olafur Eliasson. (2014). *Ice Watch* [twelve large ice blocks installed in front of the City Hall in Copenhagen]. neugerriemschneider, Berlin. Photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

of the publication of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report on Climate Change (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014b).

The power of art to engage people is supposed to be articulated in *Ice Watch* by the fact that the spectators can experience the melting of the ice with their senses and should thereby be engaged to gain an increasing awareness of climate change and of the decay of the Greenland ice sheet.[1] The decay of this ice sheet due to our current climate crisis is something that can rarely be experienced first-hand; our knowledge of this situation is mostly constructed by scientific publications, photographs, digitally generated images and the news. By confronting the public directly with

1 *Ice Watch* was also installed in Paris in 2015 and in London from December 2018 to January 2019. Both instalments took place within the realm of important happenings in relation to climate change, such as the UN Climate Conference COP21 in Paris.

Figure 3. Spread from Ice Watch Paris newspaper, published by Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014. Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles © 2014 Olafur Eliasson. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the melting of the ice, Eliasson hopes to transform climate knowledge into climate action, as he stated regarding the instalment of *Ice Watch* in London in 2018 (Yalcinkaya, 2018).

The public interaction with the ice was the main purpose of installing the artwork in a public space, and engaging people—as Minik Rosing described the effect of the artwork in Copenhagen—was something that the artwork certainly did: the ice was gazed at, touched, sniffed and even tasted. However, despite Eliasson's intentions, this rather utopian motivation arguably conflicts with the production process of the artwork and the deeper philosophical considerations that this artwork can be connected to. Even though the effects of *Ice Watch* on its audience can never be measured exactly, the confrontation of enormous melting ice blocks in a politically charged location would undoubtedly raise awareness, or at least remind people, of the hazardous condition of the Greenland ice sheet.

However, despite Eliasson's intentions to foster a more critical ecological consciousness, *Ice Watch* doesn't seem to overcome the manifold paradoxicality that is almost inherent to eco art or environmental

art. An important example of this paradox is the carbon footprint of the production of artworks that aim to criticise the carbon footprint of society.[2] In this case, artworks that aim to critically address unethical choices that lead to environmental destruction merely mimic unethical behaviour and contribute to climate destruction. Nonetheless, art, as something that is predominantly human-made, can hardly escape anthropocentric unethicality. Still, this does not necessarily mean that artworks cannot succeed in pointing out and stressing the dangers of human impact on the environment.

Even though I do not aim to entirely situate *Ice Watch* in the broad discussion of environmental art, this text will deconstruct the paradoxical nature of *Ice Watch* as an environmental artwork. By drawing on the philosophical value base of deep ecology, as well as implementing arguments from Donna Haraway's notion of 'staying with the trouble', I aim to situate *Ice Watch* as an artwork that was produced with questionable ethical values similar to those that brought us into a climate crisis, while at the same time being able to raise awareness about those exact same values.

Natural Interventions

It is important to understand *Ice Watch* in relation to other environmental artworks by Eliasson. Like *Ice Watch*, his artworks' stimulating environmental consciousness are all a result of environmental intervention. These interventions consist of interruption and claiming of space, and secondly, of an interruption and claiming of nature and ecological processes.

Green River (1998), a relatively early artwork in the oeuvre of Eliasson, serves as a clear example. This artwork could be signified as an intervention due to the fact that here Eliasson claimed and interrupted the appearance of rivers in different cities. The colour of the rivers was transformed into green by using water-soluble dye. According to the artist, the sudden green colour of the river would serve as a catalyst to trigger heightened awareness of one's surroundings (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014a).

2 The carbon footprint of art, not solely ecological or environmental art, and methods to battle the carbon footprint of the artworld were discussed at Art Basel 2019 during the talk *The Carbon Footprint of the Art World*.

For the installation of *Riverbed* (2014), which was created by Eliasson for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, the artist collected enormous amounts of stones and sand in order to install a landscape including a water stream inside the museum space. The production process of the artwork, for which Eliasson extracted his material directly from nature, could once again be regarded as claiming, and therefore intervening in, nature and natural processes. The contrast between the walls of the white cube museum building and the floor covered by stones and water is again supposed to heighten consciousness of one's natural environment (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014d).

However, if we develop the connection between the concept of an intervention and the nature of an artwork like *Riverbed*, the act of extracting the material directly from nature by the artist could also be regarded as an intervention in nature itself. A similar type of intervention underlies an artwork like *Ice Watch*. This becomes apparent in a video in which the production of Eliasson's artwork *Your Waste of Time* (2006) is documented.

Your Waste of Time is similar to *Ice Watch*, but here Eliasson placed ice blocks from Iceland in an exhibition space at MoMA PS1 in New York City. In this video, a local Icelandic farmer, who was commissioned for the job by Eliasson, removes ice blocks from their natural habitat on an Icelandic beach (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2016). By creating these artworks, Eliasson is claiming nature and intervening in natural processes. It can be argued that, by bending nature to his will, Eliasson exploited the ice blocks for the benefit of museum visitors and his own artistic practice. Eliasson's artistic interventions could be regarded as acts that are deeply rooted in anthropocentrism.

However, it is important to provide this analysis of a part of Olafur Eliasson's oeuvre with nuance. While intervening in natural processes, Eliasson does not necessarily resort to destructive behaviour that influences the natural environments that he works with directly. By using water-soluble dye in *Green River*, Eliasson made sure to respect the ecosystems of the different rivers that served as the location for his artwork. In the case of *Ice Watch*, the artist merely transported giant ice blocks that were already melting in Greenland, and would only continue this process while installed in Copenhagen. Eliasson's artworks that could

be signified as interventions, including *Ice Watch*, thus interrupt natural processes, but do not necessarily destruct them. The interventions raise awareness of our natural environment and lay bare different processes of climate change, which were preceded by destructive human behaviour.

Deep Ecology

In the 1970s, one of the foremost Norwegian philosophers of the 20th century and the founder of the eco-philosophical movement, Arne Næss, considered human behaviour to be a catalyst for the deterioration of the biosphere. Næss' article 'The Shallow and Deep Ecology Movement'—which he presented at the 3rd World Future Research Conference in Bucharest in 1972—later became one of the most influential articles for environmental ethics (Anker, 2008, p. 56).

In this text, Næss argued that there are two movements connected to the new powerful catchword 'ecology,' one shallow and one deep. According to Næss, the only correct movement in order to fight climate change is that of deep ecology, in which researchers aim to combat depletion and pollution by addressing the causes on a larger and deeper scale. This deeper scale refers to, for example, addressing power structures as well as different lifestyles that cause acts of pollution and depletion. It means that the complete societal structures that lie at the base of human behaviour have to change drastically. The *shallow* ecology movement, on the contrary, is merely focused on combating depletion and pollution without paying attention to the underlying ethical value base (Næss, 1972/2008, pp. 59–60).

The two movements (in the way that Næss addressed them in his iconic text), differ in their approach towards organisms other than humans. Namely, a central keyword in deep ecology is *systemic orientation*. This notion relates to thinking in larger biological systems, in which all organisms are related to each other and dependent on each other. Systemic thinking functions in ecology as a way of understanding that all organisms take part in a greater whole. According to Næss, all organisms bear intrinsic relations to each other, which means that one organism is not able to exist without the other. Organisms do not exist as independent entities, Næss concludes (Næss, 1972/2008, pp. 59–60).

Moreover, Næss coins the idea of *biospherical egalitarianism*, which refers to the belief that an ecological fieldworker should bear a deep-rooted respect for every form of life without any hierarchical presumptions. The eco-philosophical ideas of deep ecology claim the 'equal right to live and to blossom' (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 61). Yet Næss radically stressed the following:

> Restricting this right to human beings is an anthropocentrism with damaging effects upon the quality of life of humans themselves. This quality depends in part upon the deep satisfaction we receive from the close partnership, the symbiosis, with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master–slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself. (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 61)

The eco-philosophical movement of deep ecology breaks with so-called anthropocentrism, that is, the idea that the human species has a superior position in the ecosystem (Næss, 1972/2008, p. 62). The deep-rooted respect that Næss advocates is also manifested in the importance of diversity in forms and ways of life to which the deep ecology movement assigns great importance. Diversity in ways of life is of great benefit to the lives of all organisms including human beings, and thus of benefit to our natural environment.[3]

Since the writings of the Norwegian philosopher are predominantly philosophical, the idea of *deep ecology* does not provide a scientific model that tells us which exact actions would result in combating the climate crisis. It does, however, provide philosophical grounds for a change of attitude towards our natural environment. An attitude that radically breaks with anthropocentrism could consequently lead to less destructive and more eco-friendly human behaviour.

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3 Although deep ecology was first articulated in 1972, it could still be regarded as being highly relevant for eco-philosophy. For example, Næss' thoughts regarding biospherical egalitarianism have been of great influence on post-humanist theories. Jane Bennett's influential book *Vibrant Matter*, which was published in 2010, adopted Næss' rejection of anthropocentrism by ascribing agency to the lives of inanimate beings. Post-humanism also distances itself from anthropocentrism by blurring the boundaries between humans, animals and technology. Bennett advocates in her book for a change in the way humans regard inanimate beings; this, according to Bennett, should shift to a state of consciousness in which 'lifeless' organisms and inanimate beings are regarded as subjects rather than acted upon as objects. It dismisses humans from their superior position, just as the concept deep ecology levels out the hierarchy between humans and nature to a more equal status.

Ecological Consciousness or Destructive Anthropocentrism?

Advocating deep ecology and therefore rejecting anthropocentrism could be a major asset in the goal of ecological art to make an audience hyper-aware of the climate crisis while similarly presenting a different, deep ecological attitude. However, Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* demonstrates that rejecting anthropocentrism entirely is almost an unreachable goal for ecological art. Since art can be seen as something that is predominantly human-made and is also meant for humans, eco art is almost placed in an anthropocentric trap that it cannot escape from (as further discussed by Trydal in Chapter 11). This anthropocentric trap that *Ice Watch* can be found in gives the artwork its paradoxicality: even though it aims to heighten awareness around climate change, it does not display deep-ecological ethics because *Ice Watch* relies on an anthropocentric attitude in order to advocate for a less destructive and perhaps more deep-ecological attitude towards the environment. Disrupting Greenland's glacial ecosystem by removing ice blocks from their natural habitat in order to deliver an experience to an audience is a highly anthropocentric act—but this does not mean that Eliasson's *Ice Watch* cannot stress the benefits of an ethical reorientation towards our natural environment.

Eliasson seems to be 'staying with the trouble' of disruptive and intervening anthropocentric behaviour, in order to be able to confront the audience with the consequences of placing human beings at the top of a hierarchy of all organisms. This might make *Ice Watch* slightly paradoxical as an ecological artwork, but it does not have to mean that it failed to affect people that haptically engaged with the ice blocks in front of the City Hall. Donna Haraway's book advocates 'staying with the trouble,' which calls for learning to live with trouble in times of climate emergencies instead of focusing on a trouble-free future (Haraway, 2016, p. 7). Haraway's term *Chthulucene* refers to the age in which we live right now. As she explains, this is 'the timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth' (Haraway 2016, p. 8). Part of the *Chthulucene* is the *chthonic ones*: the ones who expose and demonstrate the consequences of Anthropocentric living (Haraway, 2016, p. 8).

Understood according to Haraway's framework, *Ice Watch* stays with the trouble. By creating an artwork that lets the audience physically engage with melting ice blocks, Eliasson is a *chthonic* in the words of Haraway: he cannot escape from anthropocentrism by demonstrating the damage that has been done to the planet by humans. However, *Ice Watch* can still confront its audience with the enormously close-up experience of the melting of an enormous ice sheet. This does not make *Ice Watch* a deep ecological artwork that conforms with the ideas of Arne Næss, but it can still advocate for a change in attitudes towards our natural environment by connecting our sense of touch and taste to *feel* the ticking clock.

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