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THE CONTEMPLATIVE WALKING IN LIGHT
SOMAESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN THE PROJECTS OF ANN VE-
RONICA JANSSENS AND OLAFUR ELIASSON

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*In the present essay, we are going to develop a concept of contemplative walking in light as an aesthetic attitude that can be linked to somaesthetics. My understanding of this type of aesthetic activity is underpinned by the broader framework developed in my PhD thesis, which is based on the poetics of light, to explain how the spectator experiences light installations. So, we are going to analyse what we understand by contemplative walking in light and how it is made possible through a perception based on corporeality and movement. To do this, we are going to analyse two installations – **Your Rainbow Panorama** (2011) by Olafur Eliasson and **YellowBluePink** (2015) by Ann Veronica Janssens- to see how they instantiate this type of aesthetic attitude and how it can be related to somaesthetics.*

1 Introduction

Since its inception in the 1960s, some of the artists working in the form known as 'light art' have used light to create environments that expose the various qualities of light, such as colour, refraction, fusion and explored how light behaves in different ways when interacting with materials. The created installations offer an exploration of building environments where light ceases to illuminate the other, creating an ambience where light is offered to spectators as a field of experimentation. We can gather these installations under the name of what I term 'poetics of light'. From this perspective, we can situate these environments as places where light becomes explicit, and its experiential qualities emerge, opening to the viewer as a field to generate their own path through feeling, perceiving, moving and imagining. Within this framework, which is part of ongoing PhD research, we propose to develop the idea of contemplative walking in light.

In the first part of the article, we will define what contemplative walking in light is. This is related to the mode of perception that takes place in light-filled environments in Light Art. Secondly, we will explore how this contemplative walking in light can be understood as a somaesthetic form by analysing the projects *YellowBluePink* (2015) by Ann Veronica Janssens and *Your Rainbow Panorama* (2011) by Olafur Eliasson. We will see how this contemplative walking establishes an involved and affected spectator, whose perceptive experimentation highlights corporeal feeling. These projects highlight some basic aspects of somaesthetics as embodied perception, establishing an interactive dialogue between spectator and environment, the fusion of art and experience, as well as the desire for the lived experience to be projected into life.

2 The contemplative walking in light

Under what I name poetics of light, there are different installations that make light a medium in which its qualities build atmospheres.

The artist's intention is very difficult to limit to a single idea or concept because he disposes of elements for light to be free in space, and every spectator creates an experience based on their relation to light. It is through perception and feeling that the being builds his journey of poetic transformation; in fact, as Mieke Bal states, "nature proposes, artist disposes" (2013, 179). In other words, artists arrange lighting installations as artistic elements, but they are transformed into acts that impact our daily lives through the experimentation of the spectator. These works transgress the boundary between art and life because they make spectators more receptive to their movements and the transformative qualities of light. Accordingly, in these lighting environments, which we can characterize as open to a multiplicity of experiences, the viewer, through a perception that goes beyond vision, establishes a journey in light accompanied by an activation of imagination. In conjunction with an 'aesthetic' body or a body that integrates and shapes the experience of our understanding of the world, these aspects give rise to what I term "contemplative walking in light".

We can define the contemplative walking in light as an aesthetic attitude where movement is a key element in the development of the perception and experience of lighting installations. A movement in which the spectator is immersed in the installation: it is not a determined walk but rather an aimless ramble. This walking unfolds in different directions: on the one hand, it is a walk close to reflective wandering, which, through its development, seeks the sensations that produce our corporeality in space. A space that is dwelled in the Heideggerian sense (Heidegger 1994, 152) or lived, and where the momentary experience of the installation arises. On the other hand, it is a walk that seeks to observe the way light reflects and changes our surrounding aspects and ourselves. A ramble where the visible and tangible create, as Merleau-Ponty claimed, an "overlap or interweaving" (1999, 116). The space of the body is constituted by movement.

This contemplative walking causes perception to unfold in a continuous present. Here, we speak of an embodied perception in the sense of Merleau-Ponty; it is through perception that we join with the world. In the environments that we will analyse below, there is envelopment within the light, through reflection or in atmospheres of colours. In the perceptual act, a split of ourselves takes place in the way that Merleau-Ponty proposes. “Vision is the means given to us to be absent from ourselves” (1999, 123). That is, we can project ourselves into what we perceive. This causes us to stop being aware of the act of perceiving itself and what we were looking at ceases to be perception to become the world of the being. In light environments, it is through this situation that one is carried away by perception, and the spectator becomes light. Being immersed in different qualities of light gives us an open field where we create our experience from sensations that arise at the same time, in the discovery of luminous space and ourselves.

However, in this situation, an experience of interiority takes place that promotes the image of the retina into spatial involvement and thus “give[s] rise to a sense of commitment and participation” in the space (Pallasmaa 2014, 244). Peripheral perception arises from its essence as a non-directional experience and a seeing that necessarily implies curiosity and intensifies an easily moulded experience and a sense of continuity between interior and exterior (Pallasmaa 2012, 230). In the installations that we are going to see, light creates a feeling of mass within which the body moves towards a fusion of the interior and exterior world. What we perceive peripherally, in this case, colour atmospheres, invigorates the experience of interiority and the feeling of fullness of space. Immersed in light, it will seem that the skin identifies with colour and light, so in addition to vision, we also experience light haptically.

Therefore, the contemplative walking offers the union between body and space in a relationship where there is a flow in constant formation. Illuminated space and body are involved in a mutual interaction of con-

stant transformation. In fact, it is a traverse where we allow ourselves to be carried away to let light in its many forms envelop and surprise us, but it is also a conscious act in the sense that we walk in order to find the effects and affectations of light. We search the point in the space we can establish as a place, in the sense that Heidegger states “that we dwell a place not to build it but that we build it up when we inhabit it” (1994, 154). The act of walking and seeing provokes a perception that is inseparable from an intensity of experience where the subject is actively constructed. At the same time, the subject creates their own path where the imagination and perception of an affected body return an attentive sense of self and offer a different way of experimenting and observing reality.

3 The contemplative walking in light as somaesthetics in *Yellow-BluePink* by Ann Veronica Janssens and *Your Rainbow Panorama* by Olafur Eliasson

In the installations that we are going to consider, we will see how the spectator's appreciation of the installation is grounded in contemplative walking as the way to relate to the environment of light. This contemplative walking is, therefore, related to the concept of somaesthetics, as proposed by Richard Shusterman, for whom: “Experience [...] has to do with experimentation, creative exploration and involvement” (2011, 280). By moving in light, the spectator creates a relationship inside light, a creation that needs movement and imagination. In the process, we discover our own being. In the projects of Eliasson and Janssens, we will examine the relations that the contemplative walk establishes with some aspects of somaesthetics and see how the spectator experiences light as a place of possibilities that provoke a celebration of feeling. We will analyse how the conditions arranged in the environments produce a connection between the body and the environment and, at the same time, how the body and space are simultaneously in formation and mutual interaction.

Firstly, let us consider *YellowBluePink* by Ann Veronica Janssens (ill.1). We find ourselves in a room that contains dense fog and hidden lights that create a colourful atmosphere. As we move through the space, the tones change and mix, creating a disorienting but enveloping experience. In this environment, the synthesis between perception and temporality is experienced. The involvement here undermines the distinction between subject and object, and there is only an immersion of the spectator in light.

In this environment, there is a multiplication of the participation of the senses. This process transforms the routine of perception into an adventure. The purely visual perception is frustrating at first, but this delimitation is overcome when the white fog is transformed into blue, pink, or yellow, producing a kind of sensory overload. In fact, in this environment, we are invited to transcend the limits of sensory and perceptual experience. The artist herself states:

This is the cause of the excess of experience, the limits are exceeded. Situations of glare, persistence, dizziness, saturation, speed, interest me because they allow us to organize ourselves around a threshold of visual, temporal, physical, and psychological instability. (Janssens 2004, 36)

The experience of diving into the fog becomes a journey of perceptual-cognitive processes that involve imagination as a catalyst to travel in a sensory space of freedom and unique associations for each spectator. It also acts as a catalyst to reflection how and what we are in the world and, by extension, as a society. In this installation, we discover visually through our movement in space. The contemplative walking promotes an experience that happens in real time as we move through space. The movement of the body is necessary to the experience, and the light is felt as if it had physical qualities; in fact, it is like feeling with the eyes. Also, the perception of the room's space becomes fluid; the fog persists,

avoiding any delimited and clear representation of the environment. This experience, as Mieke Bal states, makes the viewer aware that “perception is an incarnation and a temporality” (2013, 24). The perceptual activity of the spectator is central; it is through his activity that light gains materiality and visibility. The fog removes the appearance of all obstacles but, at the same time, gives materiality and tactility to the light. One is moving in a bath of light, blindly – one might say – but without restrictions, with no apparent limit. Our perception of time changes as there is a slowdown. The experience is activated by the reciprocal relationship between the atmosphere and the affective body. The movement between the masses of colour allows them to be experienced, creating a unique experience through our feeling in conjunction with the imagination.

YellowBluePink can also be defined by the concept of an event that is understood as a discontinuity that happens in both the perception of the spectator and the space of the room. The combination of light and fog destabilizes the perception and delays it in relation to a space that cannot be perceived immediately. The environment is a place where there is immersion but not absorption because, through experimentation, we move to unknown places where we discover invisible effects of the world.

Not all the works of poetics of light use the light in the same way to produce the effects of contemplative walking. Consider *Your Rainbow Panorama* by Olafur Eliasson (ill. 2). This atmosphere consists of a circular platform at the top of the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum in the city of Aarhus. The 360° walkway has glass panels coated with colour acetate following the rainbow hue scale. It is a space from which one can look at the city with new eyes, but it also frames the viewer as they walk down the passageway under colour atmospheres that change subtly (ill.3). This installation is a device that transforms the views of the city but also us as we resonate with colour. Wrapped in the rainbow atmos-

phere, the viewer produces images in complementary tones to the colours in the glass panels around them. For example, if you look at the city through the red glass, your eyes generate a green post-image.

The rhythm of contemplative walking changes the perception of the rainbow colours displayed in the panoramic windows. The sun is reflected in us through colour; we notice its warmth and, if we stop, we get used to the colour, and it seems to soften in our peripheral vision, while in the curved space, it is intensified. We experience an intimacy produced by the short distance. The perceived colour mixes with our imagination that creates the experience. That is, colour resonates inside us, relating to subject experiences with colour, so imagination takes the spectator to that moment, complementing the experience. *Your Rainbow Panorama* is like a vehicle for looking at our surroundings in a new way. What you experience can be panoramic in scope and also an introspective quality; as Eliasson says: “you can see yourself seeing” (Grynsztejn, Birnbaum, and Speaks 2000, 124). Contemplative walking here proposes a high-intensity experience; we feel light as we move around, increasing the sense of corporeality in space and the way the subtle changes of light intensity and colour affect our bodies.

Certainly, through these two examples, we can point to the contemplative walk as a form of somaesthetics. First, it enables the experience of our own body from within. The movement around different qualities of light in the environments allows the environments to be experienced, and through our feeling in conjunction with the imagination, we create a unique experience. So, in these installations, we find the duplicity that movement is necessary for perception but, at the same time, the sensations we develop in the course of the experience modify the movement through space. Shusterman states that

experience, as Dewey insists, involves receptive experience and productive action, reactively absorbing and reconstruct-

ing what is experienced, and in it the subject who experiences shapes and is shaped. (Shusterman 2002, 71)

In both *YellowBluePink* and *Your Rainbow Panorama*, contemplative walking enables the aesthetic experience as an emotional and bodily space. Movement and perception allow the viewers not only to experience the light installation but also to see how the qualities of light affect them. It is a process where spectator and experience transform into each other. Janssens' colour fog leads us to a slowdown only possible through movement. Our body is attuned to the atmosphere of colour, and it seems that space becomes wearable. In *Your Rainbow Panorama*, the rhythm marks the way in which colour envelops us; it formulates a space of the process and constant transformation that we inhabit, the body resonates to the colour, and we feel its presence as we feel ourselves in the coloured light. So, at the moment of the experience, the viewer becomes more aware of himself and also his environment. That situation makes the viewer aware of another way of looking at his surroundings and understanding light.

Furthermore, for Shusterman, somaesthetics implies the use of one's own body as a place of sensory and aesthetic appreciation and, at the same time, creative self-formation. The aforementioned projects exemplify the contemplative walking in light as a way to experience the effects and affections of light through movement that depends on the need for a body that feels and, at the same time, articulates a unique experience because each perception depends on the way in which the body and the subject feel and function. This fact determines the construction of realities in a constant process of making and experiencing. The spectator transforms the light space by modifying his actions according to the sensations that come from inside. Thus, the sensations that the body collects in its wandering under the effects of light are mixed with the imagination and what the feeling apprehends.

Constructing realities in a constant process of making and experience can be a way of achieving what Shusterman aims to realize:

the aesthetic experience of collaborative creation and even the cognitive gains derived from the exploration of new practices that provoke new sensations, stimulate new energies and attitudes, and therefore probe the current limits and perhaps transcend them to transform the self. (Shusterman 2012, 29)

Your Rainbow Panorama and *YellowBluePink* arrange the space so that, through the body and its movement in these contemplative walks, we feel the presence of light, get lost in its extension and feel our subjectivity in a more heightened way. Space is more than the feeling that we are inside a space since there is always a constant present: the connection between space and disposition is always active and palpable. Being in space allows the viewers to feel what kind of space they are in, and in conjunction with perception, is a field of possibilities to build their own paths through the feeling of light. The sensations elicited by the two projects analysed lead us to state that experiencing light through contemplative walking gives us a transformation of the viewer into Being-in-the-light. We are light as we experience it, and we are light according to the sensory and imaginative relationships we establish in the unfolding of the experience.

Also, Shusterman points to “the body as perceptual subjectivity, which is affected by what surrounds it by incorporating these affections into its own being” (2012, 8). Eliasson’s gradual coloured light and Janssens’ colourful fog evoke bodily sensations. The polyphony of light that unfolds in our experience and the living through walking becomes reciprocity: the illuminated space affects us and, at the same time, we change this space for our experience. Through the imagination, together with the sensations that light offers us, we can become and produce a space of coloured light in feeling our surroundings.

Finally, in their projects, both Olafur Eliasson and Veronica Janssens establish devices where light, in its different characters, enables ways to experience reality physically, in a present that is constantly updated by the relationship that the viewer establishes. Thus, a present that occurs in a trans-action from which one can become again, the indefiniteness of light means that there is no stabilization in the installation. Light qualities by nature are always changing, and contemplative walks are mutable because of how movement and perception are tied to temporality. Thereby, light and spectator create an atmosphere always incomplete and open; they resonate because they are in a state of constant becoming. This condition enlivens them and places them in a state of absolute presence.

Therefore, we can think of the contemplative walk in light as a somaesthetic tool that makes a double transformation. This tool offers a way of understanding how light affects us and how this experience can relate to everyday life. The somatic sensitivity that enables the experience of light becomes a way of intensifying life and understanding our state in relation to the environment that we inhabit. However, this somatic attention, which is made possible in the environments of Eliasson and Janssens, allows us to leave the fixed framework of daily life and provides space for new experiences and ideas. Therefore, the projects of Eliasson and Janssens have a liberating function. The qualities of light offered through the environments are a dimension that we may have ignored, but we may need a kind of slowdown. The foggy light and the light spread as colour create environments that invite us to pause and to develop a sense of space and time directed by the human being who constructs his unique and unrepeatable experience. And it is this singular pause that makes this area relevant today as the world accelerates.

4 Conclusion

As we have seen, contemplative walking in light can be understood as a somaesthetic tool for experiencing the qualities of light. It is through

the body and perceptual becoming that we experience ourselves in these spaces of light, creating our own moment. In these installations, light exists through the embodied experience and the sensations that are integrated through our corporeality. This embodied experience creates our own knowledge of the soma that allows the environment of light and the human being to complement and define each other.

The installations examined in this paper, as well as others that make up the poetics of light, become the place where we share an attitude of increased perception and reception that is made available to viewers to transpose it to the world in general. By experiencing light and through the use of bodily sensations as perceptual tools we are able to see our world with different eyes.

The act of contemplative walking involves a spectator involved and affected by a perception that goes beyond vision. This act requires an aesthetic body. Janssens and Eliasson's projects lead to a continuous dialectical openness; installation and spectator resonate to each other because both exist in a perpetual state of becoming and fluency. Through this becoming immersed in light, there is an affection for the experience and the configuration of the environment, where the spectator embarks on a journey with the imagination that gives him in return a new way of seeing reality.

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Illustrations



Fig 1. Ann Veronica Janssens, *YellowBluePink*, 2015. Artificial mist, coloured lights. Thomas SG Farnetti. Source: Wellcome Collection. CC BY-NC (creative commons licence, free to share, free to adapt).



Fig 2. Olafur Eliasson, *Your Rainbow Panorama*, 2011. Coloured glass. ARoS Museum permanent installation. "Olafur Eliasson - Your rainbow panorama 01 by Lars Aaro.jpg" by Forgemind ArchiMedia is licensed under CC BY 2.0. no changes made.



Fig 3. Olafur Eliasson, *Your Rainbow Panorama*, 2011. Coloured glass. ARoS Museum permanent installation. "Your Rainbow Panorama by Olafur Eliasson" by mp_eds is licensed under CC BY 2.0 no changes made



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