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A Case Study in Participatory Environmental Art

Feiran Chen *

Department of Cultural and Creative Arts, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 999077, China
*** Corresponding author Email:** chenfeiranhk@163.com

Abstract: This study examines Olafur Eliasson's "Ice Watch" series (2014-2018) as a participatory environmental art initiative to raise awareness of climate change. Eliasson demonstrates the effects of global warming by deliberately placing substantial pieces of glacial ice in urban centers such as Copenhagen, Paris, and London. The project integrates geological and human temporal dimensions by promoting public engagement and fostering a sense of intimacy and connection with the melting ice. The installation's ephemeral quality underscores the urgency of addressing climate change and prompts reflection and proactive measures. "Ice Watch" is widely acknowledged as an effective instrument for environmental communication, although it faces criticism regarding its ability to universally represent climate impacts. It elicits emotional and mental responses that motivate individuals to alter their behaviour and increase their engagement in community activities. This study emphasizes the significance of participatory art in addressing global environmental challenges and fostering sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental Art; Olafur Eliasson's "Ice Watch"; Critical Perspectives.

1. Introduction

Olafur Eliasson was born on February 5, 1967 (Icelandic: lafur Elasson). Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson established Studio Olafur Eliasson, a spatial research laboratory in Berlin, in 1995. In 2014, Eliasson and his longtime partner, German architect Sebastian Behrmann, established the architecture and art studio Studio Other Spaces. In 2003, Olafur represented Denmark at the 50th Venice Biennale and later that year in London at the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. Erected The Weather Project, which has been called "a landmark in contemporary art"[1].

Ice Watch (2014–2018) investigates how art and the physical response to climate change are interconnected. Eliasson has responded to significant climate change conferences and reports by placing enormous chunks of ice worldwide (Copenhagen 2014, Paris 2015, and London 2018). To kick off his project, he moved 12 ice blocks from Greenland's Nuup Kangerlua fjord to Copenhagen's streets in 2014. A circle of ice blocks was formed. Each ice block weighs between 1.5 and 5 tons.

Eliasson and geologist Minik Rosing brought 12 pieces of ice from Greenland to Paris' Pantheon Square in November 2015. The project was planned at the Paris UN Climate Change Conference. In 2018, Eliasson distributed 30 ice blocks between two locations in London for a repeat installation performance: 24 blocks on the bank of the Tate Modern and six blocks in front of the Bloomberg headquarters.

2. Background

2.1. Environmental Art

Environmental art is a group of creative practices, frequently in the form of installations, that use various artistic mediums to capture the historical development of nature, ecological change, and political reasons [2]. Many "ecological" topics are covered under the term "environmental art," but it is not limited to them. Because environmental artists must incorporate specific scientific and philosophical concepts into their work, environmental art is interdisciplinary. Environmental art emphasizes the deeper connections between systems, processes, and events by using the soil as a sculpture material. Around the world, exhibitions have shifted their attention to environmental art during the past ten years due to climate and cultural globalization.

2.2. History Context

Cave art from the Paleolithic period is frequently cited as the origin of environmental art [3]. Early human perceptions of nature, such as animal and human figures, are depicted in cave paintings. They are ancient natural history observations. In a sense, nature has long served as the preferred topic for artistic creation.

Contemporary artists are currently influenced by landscape painting and depiction for their environmental artworks [3]. Landscape painting during the post-Industrial Revolution naturalist, Romantic, and Neo-Romantic periods is regarded as the foundation for ecological art. The work of artists like John Constable during this period emphasized the beauty of the natural world and the way of life of those still rooted in the land. The painting "Gleaners" by Jean-François Millet, which shows a group of individuals collecting abandoned, yet still edible, gathered crops, is well-known. Realist artists like Thomas Cole expertly captured the splendor of the outdoors. The emergence of Impressionism strengthened the cult of nature while undermining conventional painting methods by emphasizing the experience of the natural world rather than its accurate representation. The earth art movement started in the 1960s when many artists began to consider the issue of environmental conservation and used the Earth as an inspiration for their material and canvas. Robert above Smithson is one of the well-known earth artists from the 1960s and 1970s, along with Agnes Dennis, Nancy Holt, Walter de Maria, Christo, and Jeanne-Claude. They challenged the idea that art could be purchased and sold and the growing commercialization of the art industry. One of the most notable projects is Agnes Denes' Wheatfield, a confrontation in which Denes and her group planted two acres of golden wheat on a $4.5 billion tract of land close to Wall Street in New York City.

The 1960s and 1970s land art movement inspired the environmental art movement. Since many of the iconic works

created by land artists threatened the environment, modern environmental artists advanced further than land artists because they concentrated on climate change, environmental justice, and sustainability. Eco-art, which tried to improve the unfavorable interaction between humans and the environment, was born due to this new emphasis on radicalism.

2.3. Development Status

Earth art during the 1960s and 1970s was distinguished by changes made to the environment later in the decade. Artists became interested in populism, spectacle, and market orientation in the 1980s and 1990s. However, as the century closed, many artists started to focus on the vast planetary problem. In the framework of globalization, nations have advanced at varying rates. However, significant variations exist in the world's environmental resources between countries and areas. Designer and theorist Gyorgy Kepes wrote an essay from 1927 titled “Art and Ecological Consciousness." Contemporary artists have opportunities to make three significant contributions to environmental art. First, to continue creatively sculpting the Earth's surface; second, to investigate how phenomenology is represented on the surface of the Earth; and third, to expand new worlds based on the artist's personal experiences in perceptual objects or images as well as to try and capture the expanded Spatio-temporal parameters in conceptual displays.

2.4. Global Environment Problems

The World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Program, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change prioritize environmental issues like air pollution and climate change since they are urgent global concerns. According to the International Panel on Climate Change's most recent study, limiting global warming to a goal °C of 1.5 is still feasible, provided the proper political steps are implemented immediately. Engaging the public is essential for boosting support for policy initiatives and causing changes in personal behavior. For instance, Chasek and Downie (2020) estimate that if people use current technologies better, around 20% of direct household climate change-induced emissions in the United States might decrease. This involves people lowering their home thermostats and using fewer private vehicles to lessen their carbon footprint [4].

3. Literature References

3.1. Material and Process Specificities

In the instance of Ice Watch London, the piece is built of crushed snow blocks that are years or possibly millennia old and were frozen before people began to contaminate the Earth's atmosphere. The artist and a Greenlandic geologist named Minik Rosing recovered sea pieces from southwest Greenland's Nuup Kangerlua fjord that ranged in weight from 1.5 to 6 tons. The ice blocks were formerly a part of the Greenland ice sheet, the second largest in the world after Antarctica, from which one thousand comparable ice chunks separate each second. Following their separation from one of the most extensive ice sheets in the world due to global warming, Eliasson pulled these ice blocks from the water. This demonstrates how profound the greenhouse impact is. It was challenging to establish such an exhibition format; the stones had to be transported from Denmark to Immingham, England, in nine refrigerated containers and then by truck from the port to London. Space barriers are broken by Ice Watch, which also helps people grasp ecological changes in nature and makes them consider climate change.

3.2. Material and Process Specificities

While time is frequently visualized in artworks through clocks or the weariness of life, the Ice-Watch series uses the melting of ice to depict dynamic temporal shifts. Another distinctive aspect of this artwork is its temporary nature, which foreshadows the day when people will no longer be able to meet such ice. The installation's name alone predicts when glaciers will vanish from human awareness. This indicates that the piece is not permanent because the ice will eventually melt, and the viewer can only see it briefly. Eliasson subverts the idea of birth and the natural world by relocating the iceberg to create a recursive fictitious landscape that channels time and melting ice through the viewer's experience. In other words, Ice Watch is less about the ice than the viewer's watch, inspiring reflection on both time and the ecosystem.

Rethinking time can be aided by art and culture. The vast majority of people who live in cities cannot directly experience the ecological changes on the planet. Ice watches visually represent these changes by fusing human time with geological time. It is based on the understanding that people and nature are inextricably linked and that geography, time, and scale are all subject to change. The ice-free future and the frozen past affect the melting puddles where time is drained, contaminated, dripping, and wasted. The Ice Watch, as the name suggests, places the visibility of ice - that is, the instability of the spectacle rather than the ice itself - at the center of the problem of lost or squandered geologic time. It purports to clock down to the future when glaciers are no longer visible.

3.3. Art as a Tool for Environmental Communication

According to Yalcinkaya (2018), the fundamental goal of Ice Watch is to "evoke a sense of intimacy, presence, and connection," and he especially alludes to the sensory aspect of human interactions in his statemen [5]. Put your palm on the ice and feel the smooth, icy surface on your flesh. Listen to the ice's crackling as it melts by placing your ear close to it. By interacting with an active viewer who completes the artwork and gains an expanded or transformed sense of self and world, Eliasson contends that his work challenges a model of passive contemplation of the artwork and advances his belief in the critical potential of participatory art. According to Eliasson, the fundamental ideological presumptions of participatory art position the phenomenological subject and sensory experience at the core of the work's meaning, opening up new channels for human participation and activity.

People who ordinarily would not choose to touch the ice regularly are enthused, contrasting with how cold it is. Ice watch participants have a unique opportunity to interact with the ice in-depth and informally. According to human psychology, people are said to value works of art more and strive to comprehend them when they are aware that they will vanish over time. People can dispel the notion that admiring art requires distance while learning about the magnetic field produced by touching body parts with ice.

In the photos and films documenting Ice Watch, children, teenagers, and adults can be seen physically interacting with

the ice and its gradual transition. Images from the social media campaign for the exhibit showed people kissing, cuddling, and listening to the ice with their ears close to it. They even drank the meltwater off the ice before dancing around the circle. Steen Koerner, a choreographer specializing in street dance and slow motion, created a dance in 2015 to the twelve glacial ice circles Olafur Eliasson brought to Paris' Pantheon Square, once more raising public awareness of environmental protection through art. This action further emphasizes the necessity for environmental protection through artistic means.

3.4. Artistic Symbolization of Natural Elements

Because symbols are "always a mix of something-plus-meaning" [6], the relationship between symbols and signs can be examined as the relationship between energy and a reference. The natural components depicted in Eliasson's artwork function as symbols or natural symbols that the viewer might use to frame their perception of reality.

The artist discovers that "quotations" obtained directly from nature can serve to co-create the artwork in his hunt for a well-known reference for his works of art. In Ice Watch, the ice assumes the artist's role, responding to inquiries in its language, the language of nature itself. The artist adds a new depth to the production. In other words, Ice Watch blurs the line between the artist and the artwork. As the artwork's traces progressively vanish over time, nature gradually absorbs the human creation, the personification of the artwork's symbols of natural elements. Ice Watch demonstrates the insignificance of humans in the natural world from the perspective of time and space, as some of nature's finest qualities make us aware of their frailty and impermanence. This forces us to reflect.

Each element of the natural world has its dialect and expression. The most direct and profound emotional attitude toward the environment is expressed through human activity, which communicates our relationship to the biological structure and the biological world's structure.

3.5. Environmentalist Parade

Many regions of the world are going through difficult times due to climate change and global warming. Every aspect of the environment in which people live is experiencing a process of environmental imbalance, and as a result, environmentalist protests are becoming increasingly frequent. Take the worldwide environmental and climatic demonstrations in October 2022, for instance. The New York police detained six climate activists on October 25 after they blocked a road in Manhattan; then, on October 26, they invaded the BlackRock offices in New York City with pitchforks and threw coal on the escalators. Supporters of Just Stop Oil on their 30th day of protesting on October 30, urging the British government to halt new oil and gas projects. Supporters of Just Stop Oil obstructed traffic outside Spitalfields Market in East London on October 30 as part of their 30-day protest calling for the British government to halt new oil and gas developments. During the People's Climate March in Copenhagen, people in Denmark took to the streets to pressure candidates for legislative office to take more significant action to address the climate problem. These activities promoted ecological protection but have occasionally upset the social order or backfired when there was violence.

In contrast, Ice Watch's strategy is gentler and more successful, and numerous authorities support it. Michael R. Bloomberg, UN Special Envoy for Climate Action and creator of Bloomberg Limited Partnership and Bloomberg Philanthropies, stated of Ice Watch, "It vividly highlights the urgency of addressing climate change." "We believe Olafur Eliasson's art will motivate governments, corporations, and communities to take bolder, more ambitious action to cut greenhouse gas emissions," the statement reads.

According to Justine Simons, deputy mayor for culture and creative industries, "I am thrilled that this vital piece has come to London, building on our great tradition of public art and demonstrating our continued commitment to making London a greener, more sustainable city." "The Mayor has set us the lofty aim of being a zero carbon city, and London has always been unafraid to lead the way in innovation. All ages of Londoners will be inspired by this artwork and be better able to grasp the environmental issues we are currently facing."

Olafur Eliasson's focus on perception, movement, tangible experience, and a sense of self lies at the heart of his artistic practice. He views art as a crucial tool for turning ideas into deeds in the real world. Eliasson is most known for the over two million people who saw his installation "Weather" in 2003 at the Tate Modern in London. He also works in various media, including sculpture, painting, photography, cinema, and installation.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Critical Perspectives on Environmental Art

Environmentalist artworks can assist in spreading scientific knowledge while encouraging involvement and evoking emotions, which can help academics, practitioners, and people communicate more effectively. Sharp et al. (2020) employed art to create participation in group situations, such as conversations, and to elicit both excellent and negative feelings about the natural world [7]. Do (2022) highlights art's advantages compared to other environmental communication strategies in a thorough literature analysis [8]. They describe how modern climate change art, like "Ice Watch" by Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, which was cited in this paper, can help break down psychological barriers and encourage change by, among other things, upsetting norms and offering a place for reflection or by fostering a sense of community among viewers.

4.1.1. Emotional Factors

Communication about the environment and climate change is emotionally charged, from the ongoing emotional defiance of climate change deniers to the mounting sense of hopelessness and desolation among some scientists to the optimistic public perception that taking action on climate change is good for public engagement and bad for boredom. Emotions can shed light on the function of various emotions in pro-environmental behavioral change and are important in decision-making, inspiring action, and accepting the current issue. Intentions to protect the environment and actions from mitigating climate change, for instance, can be explained by guilt and empathy, and sometimes anxiety or fear can prevent people from engaging in productive climate change dialogue.

The general significance of emotional responses to art perception has been stressed in the study of empirical aesthetics. The artwork's environment affects how strongly an emotion is evoked; for instance, the setting may include or

remove embedded information. Nevertheless, whether a specific emotion plays a central role in interpreting art is still being determined. Empirical aesthetics emphasize positive feelings since the art experience is primarily thought of as delightful and compelling.

4.1.2. Cognitive Factors

Inspiring "new ways of seeing," according to artists, environmental art reflects the world we live in and our place in it [9]. Similar indicators can be found in empirical aesthetics: contemplation of artworks is a crucial step among the many models defining artistic impacts and processing. Reflection affords the chance for self-adjustment and frequently entails meaning-making and self-discovery. People who give art more thought and who give it more meaning may be more vulnerable to its effects.

5. Limitations

One may understandably wonder if Eliasson's work represents a return to an earlier romanticism, which connected Ice Watch with a conventional summons to the sublime and masked the myriad ways the general public interacts with ice. Because the Paris installation ignores the capitalist aspects of the corporate climate crisis and the ways that the global South and poor populations are currently bearing the brunt of ecological change, the word "may somewhat inaccurately universalize the idea that it is the "human" behind the warming of the Anthropocene," as environmental art critic Christopher Heuer (2018) writes of the installation [10]. Pritchard (2021) claims that Ice Watch ignores the "real (and unevenly distributed) impact of the climatic disaster on the social sphere" as a result of the "new materialist turn in Arctic art production" (p. 302). Pritchard (2021) believes the tone needs to be revised to examine the various facets of climate justice critically. This installation is still instructive because it pedagogically illuminates the complexity of intersectional time in the spatial and temporal presence of climate emergencies within critical zones. While these issues are not insignificant regarding practical effects, this artwork may need to elicit action and chart the course of change or a much-needed, urgent critique of climate inequality [11].

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