TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE IN SOME ART OF TODAY

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In cultural terms, ecstasy is often associated with a decadent and irrational loss of self-control, a form of late Romanticism and aestheticism more typical of the nineteenth century than today's technological universe of computers and genetic studies. Broadly defined, a sense of ecstasy has always been present in art. Ecstasy, from the Greek *ex* (out) and *histanai* (to stand, to be in a place), indicates a movement outwards from within—the experience of a state of mind beyond one's self. Although the Greeks did not use the term "ecstasy," they did acknowledge ecstatic experience as an essential form of knowledge, which they called "mania." According to Plato, we attempt to reach upwards through the realm of the senses towards the perfect universe of ideas, which is the place of the soul (a world from which we originally came, close to the gods), and this attempt can be achieved in different ways, including through intense irrational experience. In his Phaedo, for instance, Socrates hailed delirious activity as a precious gift of the gods, a form of extreme love. He spoke of the divinatory visions of the oracle in Delphi, the sybil Pythia, and of another delirious experience, artistic inspiration itself. Socrates claimed that divine exaltation alone can generate poetry while craftsmanship and mere technical skills cannot. Thus, in Plato's fifth-century-B.C. viewpoint, the role of art (music and poetry in particular) in the ascension towards the place of the soul is fundamental: cold rational analysis cannot in fact allow us to reach the realm of pure contemplation, only the passionate and delirious movement of the spirit kindled by a desire for beauty can achieve this.

Before becoming best known as the street name of a psychotropic drug, *extasie* was first used in fourteenth-century France to describe states of intense excitement, frenzy, and even fearful religious trance. Throughout the Middle Ages, ecstatic experience thus implied an ability to rise up and transcend the body that was coincident with a failing of the body itself. This is vividly described by Dante Alighieri at the end of the last canto of "Paradise" in the *Divine Comedy* (1307–21)—though he did not explicitly refer to it as *extasie*:

> At this point high imagination failed:
> But already my desire and my will
> Were being turned like a wheel,
> all at one speed,
> By the love which moves the sun and the
> other stars.[1]

For mystical writers of later centuries, the term "ecstasy" evolved into a slightly different meaning: the rapture and bliss that accompanies the contemplation of the divine. Thus it came to describe a state of effulgent happiness without the fearful connotations it had before. As a movement towards disembodiment, ecstasy acted upon place and space, but there was also a dilation of time, a sense of time stopping as happens in dreams and intense memories. Ecstatic time seemed simultaneously to stop and expand to infinity.

The Baroque sculptor and architect Gianlorenzo Bernini attempted to represent just that state of bliss in his renowned marble sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1645–52). Located in the Cornaro Chapel of the Santa Maria della Vittoria Church in Rome, *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* features Theresa of Avila, one of the saints of the Counter Reformation—who described the ecstasy of religious awakening as a flaming golden arrow that had pierced her heart—balanced on a cloud and flanked by an angel. Through this work, Bernini expressed a condition of infinite pain combined with utter pleasure and sweetness, and his ambiguous imagery—between the tragic and lyrical—is both mystical and erotic. The dying saint leans backwards on a floating cloud made of stone, with eyes closed and mouth slightly open, while the angel (who has just removed the arrow from her body) observes her intently, gently holding onto her robe. The saint is engrossed in her experience and cut off from the world around—suspended in an instant where the physical and the emotional are completely one, and where mortal passion is sublimated into the love of God. Her body seems to have disappeared: her flowing robes appear empty, with myriad folds that blend into and become one with the clouds upon which she is resting. The angel, by contrast, is portrayed as a physical and worldly being, almost a displaced self-portrait of the artist himself, observing ecstasy from the outside and conjuring up the statue from the rock.

The key to this sculpture lies in its vertiginous sensation and precarious balance, representing a shift from the notion of transcendent ecstasy (typical of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance) to an ecstasy of immanence, typical of the nascent modernity of the 1600s. Often accused of being overtly erotic, the saint is boldly present and palpably attuned to her body. At the same time, she is experiencing disembodiment and a visionary experience that is suggested both by gilt bronze rays of sunlight falling behind her from above the altar and the actual suffused light filtering in from the church window hidden above the sculpture. This duality marks the shift from a fundamentally Medieval universe of absolutes to the modern world of individualities and specificities that was emerging at the time, a world where religion and science could coexist within the theatrical suspension of disbelief.

With the waning of religious belief, however, and the parallel rise of scientific knowledge and psychological study in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ecstatic experience was relegated to the realm not of unique privilege—as it had signified for centuries—but rather to that of superstition, illness, psychosis, and loss of voluntary control. The hysteric (from *hysteria*—the uterus) and ecstatic belonged not to the universe of rational beings and productive orders. They hovered over the world of womanhood, ghosts, Gothic novels, and all that was shunned by science and rationalism.

Thus, in the new bourgeois, rational, and patriarchal universe, ecstasy, as an aesthetic and spiritual experience, had to be transformed into something less disruptive, something that would have little direct impact on daily life. The category of "the visionary" was thus introduced, grounded on the connection and separation between, on the one hand, what the eye and mind see (the vision) and, on the other, what the person is actually experiencing in the real world. William Blake's drawings and poems embody the perspective of a modern immanent vision (found within the simplest things and not belonging to a transcendent universe), yet also preempt any true danger of the ecstatic mingling into the real, as in the first verses of his "Auguries of Innocence" (1803):

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour.[2]

As visionary experience—that is, as an experience of the mind that both transcends the body and allows the body to navigate through daily life— the ecstatic dimension continued to exist throughout the Romantic period, ultimately transforming itself through modern art in the sublime apprehension of pure essences. In other words, the creation of the visionary was a strategy to integrate the spiritual into the life of lay society by rendering innocuous its potentially disruptive effects on day-to-day productive existence.

The experience of unexpected emotional intensity connected with seeing things differently—a form of vision found immanently in the things of the world, rather than as a desire for transcendence from the world—lies at the root of modernism and would develop throughout the twentieth century. Among its first expressions were the British Symbolist Walter Pater's writings, in particular his 1873 essay "On the Renaissance":

> Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us—for that moment only.... To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.[3]

James Joyce would later use the word "epiphany" to describe this form of experience, where the intensity of even the simplest things in life becomes unexpectedly manifest to us, full of meaning. Marcel Proust would explore something similar under the form of a revelation or memory triggered by a seemingly inconsequential experience, like eating a madeleine. As Umberto Eco described:

> The epiphany is an ecstasy, but an ecstasy without God: it is not transcendence, but the soul of the things of this world, it is—as has been said—a materialist ecstasy. Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of Joyce's early novels, is struck from time to time by apparently insignificant happenings, the voice of a woman singing, the smell of rotten cabbage, a street clock whose luminous face suddenly emerges from the night.... In other writers, Proust for example, revelation occurs through the play of memory: over a given image or tactile sensation the memory of another image, of another sensation felt in another moment is superimposed and, by virtue of a short

> circuit in the "involuntary memory," it triggers the revelation of a kinship among events of our life, which the cement of memory holds together by conferring unity upon them. But, here too, the thing that gives sense to life as the pursuit of Beauty is the privileged experience of these moments, and these moments can be obtained only if we learn to enter ecstatically into the heart of the things that surround us.[4]

Only apparently paradoxical, the formulation of the aesthetic experience as a form of immanence rather than transcendence (to be found within things themselves as opposed to beyond them) went hand in hand with the distinction between natural beauty and artistic beauty. For Clive Bell, writing in 1914, "significant form" is the quality peculiar to all art objects that stir aesthetic emotions. They are intentionally created and convey the emotions of "ultimate reality" that their creators, the artists, felt. They are not elements of natural beauty, and they are timeless. According to this perspective, modern art, like primitive art, focuses on significant form, doing away with or disregarding superfluous description and representation. Bell wrote in almost religious terms about this emotion:

> Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life... A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy... Great art remains stable and unobscure because the feelings that it awakens are independent of time and place, because its kingdom is not of this world. To those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago? The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy.[5]

Aesthetic experience, as a form of ecstatic emotion, was thought to be grounded on gratuitous contemplation. The painting itself was the concrete and real thing in which beauty was to be immanently found, the ultimate material reality. Modern art in its search for an ultimate aesthetic experience was thus related to both visionary transcendence and epiphany at once—as expressed, most notably, by Abstract Expressionists Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, among others, shortly after World War II. Their artworks became tangible proof of pure ecstatic, autonomous, and authentic experience in the here and now.

By the mid-twentieth century, however, the notion of art as a form of ecstatic transcendence, where the layperson contemplates ecstasies experienced by artists themselves (Pollock, for example), waned in favor of epiphanies searched for and discovered once again within the real world. Pop art, Arte Povera, Conceptualism, Land art, and Minimalism emerged. Beginning in the 1960s, contemporary aesthetics reproposed the experience of immanence in a novel fashion. Detached contemplation was questioned and forms of engagement of the viewer in the artwork through environments and various degrees of mental and physical interaction developed. Artists began to construct situations where viewers might experience epiphanies and sudden discoveries of beauty and knowledge within simple realities. Their artworks became exercises through which viewers/agents might rediscover the ability to live ecstatically within real life, thus breaking down the separation of ecstasy from reality

that the modern notion of the visionary had instituted as a form of social order and a rationalization of irrationality during the pre-Romantic age.

This questioning coincided with a suspicion and rejection of what were viewed as modernist aesthetics—those based on detached contemplation of works of art reaching for the ultimate experience, the essential experience, the sublime edge beyond which there was no more art. This suspicion was mainly grounded on political radicality. The media and advertising were by then profusely using subliminal messaging and manipulation of consciousness without rational argumentation in order to further consumer society in a subtly authoritarian mode. The role of culture became the critique of those strategies.[6] Culture had to attempt to further a sense of autonomy of individuals as opposed to creating emblematic and metaphoric signifiers for others, like advertising was doing.

Postmodern art and culture, beginning roughly in the 1960s and peaking in the 80s, could also be viewed as oddly paradoxical from the perspective of our topic: while questioning the strictures of rational order (that it perhaps erroneously associated with high modernism) and opening thought up to multiple possibilities and infinite interpretations, it was however also one of the most hermeneutic (and thus elaborately rationalistic) movements. Grounded on self-awareness and critical thinking, strict principles and interpretative closures and certainties, and a deeply self-conscious period of history, postmodernism was certainly not very open to multiple possibilities and infinite interpretations. The reign of critical theory was not a period characterized by a lack of rational thinking; in their effort to eschew anything arbitrary, many postmodernists grounded their perspectives in what they felt were verifiable fields of knowledge, from sociology and linguistics to psychoanalysis. In favor of rigorous contextual interpretations, they denied the visionary, autonomous, and timeless "authentic" experience of art-making and of art which they saw as regressively Romantic and catering to an authoritarian perspective on knowledge and politics. Artists, as they "deconstructed" the "texts" around them, repudiated notions of authenticity and originality (essential to any view of art as ecstasy, whether transcendent or immanent) and adopted detached and disenchanted attitudes, including irony, as their main communicative strategies. These perspectives were antithetical to the states of intense emotion traditionally associated with epiphany or visionary experience, not to mention ecstasy. Postmodernism critiqued the authoritarian rationalism of modernism, yet it also eliminated from its aesthetics the only nonrational aspect of modernism: the mystical and sublime experience of "essentials" in art, the ultimate black square of Kasimir Malevich. And in the end, cultural theory took over.

Today, such perspectives seem much less radical, and consumer society has interiorized even cultural relativism and critical theory (as the spectacularization of news broadcasts, documentaries, talk shows, and political debates has proven). Post-feminist thinkers, however, recovered spaces for emotional possibilities throughout postmodernism, such as Julia Kristeva's concept of *jouissance*, which would inform the work of a number of artists and filmmakers and ultimately underlie the work of artists who today are exploring a nonanalytic tradition of art based on intense and direct emotions as well as a re-appreciation of personal and private subjectivity.

It is worth noting that the beginning of the twenty-first century is marked by a heightening of religious beliefs in society at large and the growth generally of spiritual impulses that seem to have evolved as a way of counteracting the vacuum of values engendered by consumer society. In this context art partially pacifies the increased insecurity and fragility of the body in globalized society. Thus, the question to address is not if, but how art is exploring the ambiguous ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of these new beliefs and impulses—how it is questioning them, amplifying them, opening them up, and doubting them.

One of the most peculiar aspects of contemporary artists today who are engaging with intense aesthetic emotion is in fact their intent to create artworks that might trigger in the viewer what was achieved through contemplation in the past, yet do this without denying the empirical and participatory nature of contemporary art as defined in the 1960s. In Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), as well as in Cardiff's *Playhouse* (1997) and *Forty-Part Motet* (2001), one is both placed within the scene (through the use of binaural recording) and observes it from without. In Pierre Huyghe's *L'expédition scintillante, Acte 1* (2002), the viewer is situated amid the elements of a strange journey, aware of the weather, yet also transported to a fictitious land reminiscent of the white Antarctic. Similarly, in Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003), Massimo Bartolini's *Teste* (Heads, 1997–present), and Jeppe Hein's moving benches and other interactive modifications of architectural space (2000–present), one views oneself viewing something utterly alien from the place one actually stands in, yet what one is viewing becomes a natural part of that space, something normal and perfectly at home, so that one's body feels totally inscribed in its space.

There is a particular relationship between music and ecstasy, a relationship that has been evoked and used in most cultures since the earliest rituals. Music and sound affect our bodies and emotions directly on a primal and immediate level, perhaps because they are related to the dark and blind experience of the womb, modulated only by the rhythm of a mother's breathing and the sounds filtering in from without. Janet Cardiff communicates by "spatializing" sound and creating forms of intimacy with her audience. To experience one of her audio walks, which she has been creating since 1991, one dons the headphones of an audio (and at times video) Walkman and follows the prerecorded instructions. Spoken softly by her surrogate self, her instructions bid the viewer to follow the same route she traveled as the recording was made—through dark streets and alleys (*The Missing Voice [Case Study B]*, 1999); tunnels or grassy fields (*Villa Medici Walk* and *Wanås Walk*, both 1998); along waterfronts (*Louisiana Walk #14*, 1996); museum basements (*P.S.1 Walk*, 2001); amongst the moldy smell of books (*Carnegie Walk*, 1999); or in small bomb shelters from World War II (*Walk Münster*, 1997). By editing in other voices, music, sound snippets from B movies, and ambient sounds, Cardiff shapes the emotional experience of her audience. She suggests open narratives, film noir, the pleasures of escaping into a fantasy world, the loss of self-control, as well as the sadness of loss and memory. Her voice seems to come from within one's own brain, as one feels at once embodied and displaced in the here and now and beyond.

When Cardiff and Miller began to create works for indoor gallery spaces, they turned their attention to the workings of other types of spaces of spectacle, places where people physically congregate and collectively experience transportation to other distant universes, like going to the movies only to be interrupted by the coughing or whispering of unknown neighbors sitting nearby. The white cube

of the exhibition site thus becomes a theater, an opera house, or even a huge optical device. In *Muriel Lake Incident*, what looks like a large wooden camera obscura is actually a miniature theater: as one leans towards a small square opening on the side, wearing headphones, and peers into the hyper-perspectival space within (with its miniature seats and proscenium), one watches fragments of a black-and-white video reminiscent first of a Western movie, as a cowboy sits by a campfire, and then of films by Orson Welles. A woman in a black slip and high heels then dances alone to music by Andonis Dalgas, a folk singer from the Bosphorus. The events in the film seem to spill over into the viewer's space; the sounds of shooting and people fleeing seem to come from the audience, from amongst the small sculpted wooden seats that populate the transitional space where real and imaginary are no longer separated, but negotiated on the edge of folly, passion, memory, and, perhaps, ecstasy.

In theater, danger, abnormality, passion, catharsis, and poetry are interrelated, as is evidenced in Cardiff's other two model theaters—*Playhouse* and *The Paradise Institute* (with Miller, 2001).

Among Cardiff's most poignant solo works in which sound, music, aesthetic emotion, and religious ecstasy are intertwined is the stark *Forty-Part Motet*, which explores polyphonic structure. Forty speakers on stands each play one of the forty choral sections of Thomas Tallis's work *Spem in Alium nunquam habui* (I do not have faith in thou, 1575) that were individually recorded in London's Salisbury Cathedral. As one meanders through the space, voices grow and diminish depending on one's proximity to various speakers in an ever-changing concert. Being part of the audience feels like being an invisible presence weaving amongst a crowd of singers, as opposed to the singers being invisible (which they actually are). One eavesdrops on each of them individually, yet they always elude: Tallis's score is structured so that the singing rapidly swings around the space, never resting in one point for long. Rather than walking around the piece it is as if the artwork walks around the viewer, in a curious reversal yet reaffirmation of participation in art where participation and contemplation are one.

Pierre Huyghe is a deeply anti-authoritarian artist whose aesthetic is based on celebrating the poetic and visionary potential in all individuals. He explores the possibilities of infinite interpretations, reenactments, inflections, transformations, or translations and does not believe that the power of media over individuals is ultimately so great. Eschewing strong or permanent statements, he has created a number of installations, films, books, and collaborative projects through the 1990s to the present that underscore the human ability to incarnate visions and epiphanies in the real world, denying any notion of transcendence and affirming the pleasures of ecstasy and extreme romanticism.

One of Huyghe's favorite artists of the past is Fra' Angelico, a fifteenth-century Dominican monk who lived in the San Marco convent in Florence, where he painted a scene from the New Testament in each monk's cell. Fra' Angelico belonged neither to the first generation of Renaissance painters of the early 1400s (who had broken with Medieval and modern representation of real life, like that of Masaccio), nor to the flowering Renaissance of the late 1400s and early 1500s (with artists including Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, Michelangelo Buonaroti, and Leonardo da Vinci). His mystical temper led him to join realism with a visionary and spiritual vein. He used color as the substance of

space itself, a form of material sublimated into light. He perceived the divine in all things and manifested this by bathing his figures in light. For Fra' Angelico—and in a lay and contemporary fashion, perhaps also for Huyghe—everything that is created is divine, and since the divine is perfect, it follows that reality, too, is perfect, if looked at with an open mind.

In 2002, for example, Huyghe created *L'expédition scintillante. A Musical.*, a dense work organized around the desire for otherness, in the futuristic glass and cement four-story building of the Kunsthaus in Bregenz, Austria. On the ground floor, a black box called Hal constituted the work's prologue: a mysterious object that he had already included in his French Pavilion display at the Venice Biennale a year earlier, it contained the computer program regulating the exhibition, revealing its mechanical nature as something almost magical. The second floor featured *Acte 1*, a gallery space turned into a natural landscape, with a large boat sculpted out of ice tilted on its side and sublimely melting away, John Cage's *Radio Music* (1956) playing on a radio on the floor nearby (the boat and Cage together suggesting the free off-shore radio of the utopian 1970s), and real snow and rain falling from the ceiling.

Acte 2 (Light Box), on the third floor, presented a dance of sound and lights on a miniature stage made of two halves of a white cube. The music of Erik Satie and vapor from a fog machine created a relaxing and highly pictorial environment of pure contemplation—as unnatural as *Acte 1* had been natural in its constitution. The empty stage of dancing colored lights and mist was intended by the artist to be a model for a concert, or the empty stage after a concert. Beams from colored lights dance to music in a work that eludes analysis, except for the purely aesthetic analysis of form, color, light, and movement. Both material (in that it is a large light-and-sound box) and immaterial (in that it is a hazy colored stage for a concert that can only be imagined), *Acte 2* is an enigmatic in-between entity with a soothing phantasmagoric quality. The journey ended upstairs on the last floor of the exhibition space with *Acte 3*, a large black square ice-skating rink where a performance had been held on the day of the opening, the traces of which—figure-eight shapes made by the blades of skates on the surface of the ice—were prominently evident.

Informed by theater and cinematic experience, the design of the exhibition was itself the material and meaning of the art on display. Huyghe repeated this strategy of unifying display and artwork in *Float* (2004) at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin, Italy. For his solo exhibition in a museum that was formerly an eighteenth-century royal residence, Huyghe mapped and recreated the shape of the gallery space in the form of a large white balloon made out of Tyvek on a one-to-one scale. During a procession, the inflated and oddly shaped "float" was led by children up to the castle on the top of the hill, and then was laid to rest within the same gallery that had generated its form, transforming the interior into a hazy, flowing, and soft space through which the audience could walk. It became a space of myriad folds—of infinite multiplication and transformation, as a Baroque space might be. In these projects Huyghe does not deny our impulse towards transcendence and disembodiment: he reverses it. In his universe, there is no need to escape—ecstasy, vision, and epiphany are all possible here and now, in our world, on earth. It is paradoxically at once transcendent and immanent.

"Art speaks privately to the public" (as opposed to the media, which speaks publicly to the private), Massimo Bartolini once stated.[7] In his installations, Bartolini creates strange and visionary places

where people can experience metaphysical dimensions. Solitude, tranquility, vision, and surprise are all states and emotions elicited by his art, which is about how to translate something very abstract into something very tangible—"to feel with the mind and to think with the body."[8] His environments are unusual, skewed, and improbable. He raises floors and sinks the furniture of the room in them; he smooths all the corners and edges (where walls meet floor or ceiling) of a white room in which an arrow of light dances to the sound of drums; or he elevates the floor to the height of a windowsill, creating a vertiginous view onto the outside. All are intended to remove spatial and temporal reference points, just as metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico did before him, in order to suspend a sense of the here and now and heighten a sense of spirituality. At the same time, creating environments to be experienced by his audience, Bartolini makes it possible to truly walk through a parallel universe of the mind—again, a "real" space and a "mental" space at once, a space of embodiment and disembodiment, a space both of immanence and transcendence.

An early series of works by Bartolini called *Teste* (Heads) comprises white rooms with curved corners and edges. In *Teste n 1* (1996–97), small arrows of light (the same shape as those on computer screens) shoot around a rounded room to the changing sound of recorded drums and the unpredictable noises of the audience within, eliciting a feeling like being inside someone's head or inside the "mind" of a computer. *Tamburo* (Drum, 1990–2002) developed out of the *Teste*: a pristine white room in which the floor pivots as you move across it. Reactive to people's weight and movements around the space, the floor shifts slightly up and down, much like a ship gently rocking on calm waters. Yet in this empty, slightly unstable space, Bartolini placed some walnuts on the floor, which roll as its inclination changes. Like all of his environments, *Tamburo* seems like a place that has materialized here from another universe, one that has fallen in place.

Bartolini has also created a number of outdoor works. His *Senza titolo (Onda)* (Untitled [Wave], 1997–2001) was a pool with a solitary wave (generated by a mechanism underneath the pool) installed in the gardens of the Villa Medici in Rome and later in an outdoor courtyard in Long Island City, New York—a highly unusual vision in the middle of a city.[9] The wave lapped water over the sides of the pool onto the surrounding rich soil, nourishing a ring of edible plants. For the artist, water is a material for sculpture that creates shapes without controlling them excessively. The solitary wave that seems to propel itself endlessly until it reaches the shoreline is a metaphor for the perfect *perpetuum mobile*.

In the installation called *Finestra su finestra* (Window on window, 2002–03), he brought the outdoors indoors by creating a small room with a view, building a space around an existing window and raising the floor within it so that it lined up with the bottom of the window. Rectangles of glass were cut from the window so that fresh air could penetrate this "intermediate" space, neither indoors nor outdoors. A sink in the room featured water that flowed upwards into the faucet instead of pouring out from it. This new place suggested a place away from real life, yet Bartolini's interest in natural phenomena, materials, and energy also heightened a sense of presence in an expanded here and now. Bartolini's works are in fact poetic attempts to reconcile opposites: the desire to create alternative otherworldly spaces for the mind and the body, while also grounding art in the real experience of nature and its forces. Like James Turrell before him, Bartolini's art is about perception and meditation. But there is always a narrative quality or moment involved that grounds each installation

in a sense of the contingent and the specific (as opposed to the universal), which lends a surreal overtone to his works.

Danish artist Jeppe Hein creates installations that appear to be contemplative visions of wondrous events, yet are actually based on subtle interactions with their audiences. Suggestive of Minimal "specific objects" in their form, they are not specific to themselves or to their location at all, but are instead highly voluble constructions that are reactive to individual presence. Like Bartolini, Hein materializes one aspect of ecstasy in the here and now, denying both the medieval vision of ecstasy as a departure from the body, as well as the Romantic aesthetic of the visionary as privy to a universe beyond reality that with heightened sensibility we are able to glimpse. By collapsing visions into the fabric of the real, for Hein the contemplative and the active are one and the same. If we think we can only imagine certain physical effects when our minds becomes fixated, cut off from the flow of reality, intent on obsessively perceiving simple events and movements, Hein finds simple physical and engineering solutions to ground that layer of vision in actual perception, thus producing an empowering and liberating effect in his viewers, no longer passive spectators of such effects in virtual reality, television, or digital animation film.

Some of his projects made since the beginning of this decade involve benches—places to sit and contemplate, places of rest and stillness, intervals in museum spaces in the temporal flow of daily events. In *Moving Bench #2* (2000), a gallery bench moves slowly when one sits on it; in *The Smoking Bench* (2003), those seated become surrounded by smoke. Other works act upon the architecture of exhibition spaces, structures thought of as stable and constrictive. In *Moving Wall* (2000), when one sits on a bench near a wall in an open gallery, another perpendicular and hidden wall is activated, sliding out to provisionally construct a small, isolated, and private space for the viewer. When one gets up, the wall retracts again and disappears. Hein developed this idea into *Invisible Moving Wall* (2001), where three freestanding walls in the gallery space moved slowly (four inches per minute) so as to create an imperceptible shift in the architecture that ultimately altered the perception of the space altogether: the viewer not only moved around the space, space moved around the viewer, like the spheres in the heavens. Some works by Hein are even more radically visionary, like *Bear the Consequences* (2003), in which a flame of fire bursts out from a wall when one comes close, and *360° Presence* (2002), a twenty-eight-inch-diameter steel ball that, when viewers are present, moves around the exhibition space banging into walls and chipping off paint and plaster, but stands still when the space is empty. Thanks to simple motion sensors, the act of looking becomes as productive as touching.

Since the late 1990s, Olafur Eliasson has been exploring relationships between nature and culture—natural beauty and art—through photography and installations. By using mirrors and prismatic, sometimes kaleidoscopic, structures, he delights in constructing marvelous and magical viewing experiences as well as revealing the physical mechanisms by which vision and thought are constructed and shaped by each of us. As part of an untitled project for the Villa Medici in Rome in 1998, he constructed a "well" in the formal Renaissance gardens. When one gazed into the well one saw, instead of water, a vertiginously deep space created by hexagonal mirrors that reflected and incorporated the viewer and the trees and sky above. Traditional Renaissance perspective was broken

up and multiplied into myriad fragments, and the view changed completely as one moved even slightly around the well. In the exhibition catalogue, the artist bid the viewer:

> Join me in establishing a third way of seeing not based on perspective. See your world as a dimension in constant movement and change, totally depending on how you move around it, but still known by familiar structures and recognizable elements used for orientation. With this perception-psychological and phenomenological way of seeing, we will try for a moment to understand landscape.[10]

For the 2003 Danish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, the single well had multiplied and grown exponentially into a complex labyrinth of viewing machines, recollecting the utopias of natural and organic architecture somewhat reminiscent of Buckminster Fuller's. People walked upstairs and downstairs, enjoying different views as well as the insides and outsides of prisms. Eliasson's outdoor installations have often involved the insertion of artificial elements such as mirror surfaces, whereas his indoor installations have often included natural light, water, ice, mist, and other environmental elements. For *The Mediated Motion* (2001) at the Kunsthaus in Bregenz, Austria, he created a sensory journey through a series of spaces filled with natural materials such as earth, plants, water, fog, and wood.

Through the study of the mechanics of vision and by exposing how we perceive natural beauty, Eliasson thus looks for ways of making art that is both visionary and scientific. He is interested in joining the contemplative dimension of art with the participatory one—because contemplation itself is an act of engagement and allows for a phenomenological understanding of experience. In his project for the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London, the artist radically transformed the giant space of the ground-floor hall by introducing weather indoors and by virtually doubling the size of the space. *The Weather Project* (2003) bordered on the sublime and was suggestive of the large scale of natural phenomena in relation to the small scale of the human body. At the end of the hall was a great setting sun. Walking through the expanse of space towards that sun, mist condensed and dissipated, like weather changing throughout the day. A gigantic mirror covered the entire ceiling, giving the impression that the ceiling had been removed from the space. The sun in fact was made "whole" by the mirror, which doubled the hemicycle made out of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps (thereby transforming it into globe of radiant sunlight). Eliasson created the feeling of a limitless space—a place to lie down and watch the crowds of people reflected above, in the dreamlike universe of the mirror. The work imparted a sense of awe and spirituality, a feeling of peace bordering on the religious. Yet the sun was made of electric lamps, the vapors were the result of fog machines, and the boundless space was the effect of mirrors. The viewer was transported into other dimensions only on the condition of a willful suspension of disbelief, not by deceit.

By anchoring epiphany and aesthetic emotion in our experience of the physical world (as in the work of Bartolini, Eliasson, and Hein) and by grounding fiction in the real and heightening the sense of our own bodies playing out narratives (as in the work of Cardiff and Miller and Huyghe), artists are indulging and exploring strong responses to disembodiment and ecstatic or visionary experience. Yet they are also confirming the importance of being aware of the mechanisms that allow for these experiences, questioning the desire for detachment. While they go along with our

desire to transcend and escape reality, they also counter that impulse by grounding our experience of their artworks in the physical world, thus celebrating the here and now.

Notes

1. Dante Alighieri, "Paradise," The Divine Comedy, trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1993), 499.

2. William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence" (1803), in The Portable Blake (New York: Viking Penguin, 1946; reprint 1976), 150.

3. Walter Pater, in The Renaissance (1868) (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 196–97.

4. Umberto Eco, ed., On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 254–55.

5. Clive Bell, "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" (1914), in Susan L. Feagin and Patrick Maynard, eds., Aesthetics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

6. As exemplified by the Frankfurt School in the writings of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer, as well as those of Walter Benjamin and later Michel Foucault.

7. Bartolini, interview for Tuscia Electa—Arte Contemporanea nel Chianti 2002–03, http://tusciaelecta.it/engbartolini.htm.

8. Ibid.

9. Untitled (Wave), P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, 11 March–20 May 2001.

10. Olafur Eliasson, "Your Way of Seeing by Perspective?," in La ville, le jardin, la mémoire, eds. Laurence Bossé, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and Hans Ulrich Obrist (Paris: Paris Musées; and Milan: Charta, 1998), n.p.