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On Art and Water

Review

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as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded forever

-Herman Melville, Moby Dick, 1851

Regardless of taste, education or aesthetic inclination, people engage with the visual arts for personal reasons and the greatest artists can touch large numbers of people in very intimate ways. Consider that art affects each person, as differently, as there are types of people who participate and it becomes clear that creating powerful art is no small task. For some people living and breathing Art is secondary to drinking water, for others it is like visiting the mist tent at a hot summer music festival, some form of relief.

Like the visual arts, the discourse surrounding water is inherently public, carried out in both scholarly and popular media. Of the numerous articles and volumes written about water, most begin with an eloquent delivery of statistics imparting the value of water and its necessity in the genesis and sustaining of life. Water is a very special liquid by itself and in the right hands it becomes so much more. Artists throughout history have depicted and used water in compelling ways. It is a medium with potential to reach everyone because the need for water is pervasive. Artists can reach audiences beyond their community so effectively and so clearly that it is truly possible to reach an international, global audience in addition to the local.

The physical composition of water provides for its place of esteem among elements and is similar in import to the work of Icelandic Artist Olafur Eliasson. By creating thoughtful, moving and poetic installations, Eliasson affects large numbers of people. Within his artwork the relationship between concept, audience, message and medium is fluid. Engaging with this work one gets the sense that each component, whether conceptual or formal, works together and harmoniously as if intentionally conceived with respect to the all of the other elements.

To create conceptually tight and visually impressive artworks requires skill. Imagine the tension required to manage the various components necessary to create moving artworks at a grand scale. Basic physics describes the surface tension of water as similar to an elastic membrane in which each molecule acts to keep all other molecules together and thus fluid. Eliasson's work *Beauty* (1993) consists of

an illuminated source of mist, on the ceiling of a dark gallery. A simple description, a simple premise. Yet, however, in reality encountering this work is actually much more grandiose. A sparkling rainbow beckons you to enter the other wise dark gallery, shimmering, it appears to float in some visible breeze.

This rainbow conjures numerous associations that draw you out of the gallery momentarily before the mist hits your skin and you feel the temperature drop suddenly and unexpectedly. The tiny drops of water collecting on your skin pull you back inside the gallery. And while everyone has this experience, not everyone, has this experience exactly. Depending upon your entry, the crowd, where you wind up etc. everyone sees a rainbow in the illuminated mist but each rainbow is experienced differently because of the random nature of mist, the equally random nature determining your position, as well as the random nature of personal histories affecting the experience. Everyone will not see the exact same rainbow. *Beauty* demonstrates an artistic elasticity that allows Eliasson to reach numerous participants on their own terms. Giving them an opportunity to transform.

A cursory glimpse of the current conversation surrounding the contemporary state of water includes stories about shortages, dosing, chemicals and disaster. The need for respite is justified. Whether one possesses the specialized vocabulary to engage in an academic dialogue about the contemporary state of water, or one refers to water simply as a liquid, everyone experiences the physical properties of water. Thus charging water with power adept artists like Eliasson can use to transcend platitudes and give people true common ground to stand on. Water represents an objective truth because it acts according to scientifically established principals all humans relate to and because everyone needs it water has the potential to reach truly everyone.