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Flooded, Livestreamed, Transformed: Olafur Eliasson and the Post-Pandemic Museum

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Abstract. This article examines Life, an art exhibition by Olafur Eliasson, as a case study for rethinking the museum in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on critical perspectives from Paul Valéry, Theodor W. Adorno, Douglas Crimp, and Brian O'Doherty, the essay analyzes how Eliasson's intervention suspends and reconfigures dominant regimes of exhibition, from the encyclopedic accumulation of objects to the modernist "white cube", by materially flooding the institution, removing architectural boundaries, and enabling new sensory interfaces. The analysis also considers the role of live-stream technologies, which multiply mediated standpoints and simulate non-human perspectives, thereby challenging anthropocentric assumptions of spectatorship. Engaging Natasha Myers's notion of the "Planthroposcene," the essay situates Life not as a definitive ecological paradigm but as a performative experiment in plant-human cohabitation under curatorial and technological mediation. Combining critical theory with close description of the work's material and institutional conditions, the article argues that Life anticipates a post-pandemic museum that is porous, ecological, and in continuous transformation.

Keywords: Olafur Eliasson, contemporary art, museum, technology, nature

1. Introduction

This article explores how a recent artistic experiment, particularly Olafur Eliasson's installation Life, exhibited in 2021, propose new paradigms for exhibition practices that challenge the spatial, sensory, and institutional logic of traditional and modern museums. By situating Life in dialogue with a lineage of critical thought from Paul Valéry's early 20th-century reflections to Theodor W. Adorno's dialectical critique, and from Douglas Crimp's institutional analysis to Brian O'Doherty's phenomenology of the white cube the article examines the persistent tension between art and life, enclosure and openness, contemplation and immersion. It argues that Eliasson's work, developed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and marked by a growing concern with ecological and technological entanglements, exemplifies a shift toward more porous, participatory, and environmentally embedded exhibition models. By reengaging the museum's role in shaping perceptual experience, Life reopens the debate on the future of art institutions in a time of planetary crisis and accelerated digital mediation.

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2. The museum as a space of distance: Valéry, Adorno, Crimp, and O'Doherty

The critique of the museum as a space of disconnection, alienation, or ideological regulation spans across several decades and is articulated by a constellation of thinkers whose reflections mirror the transformations of museological paradigms. Among them, Paul Valéry and Theodor W. Adorno are pivotal figures in the early to mid-20th century critique of what may be called the traditional or classical museum. Later, Douglas Crimp and Brian O'Doherty would develop analyses rooted in the structural logic of modernist exhibition spaces, particularly the paradigm of the white cube.

Paul Valéry's foundational essay "Le problème des musées" [1] offers a sharp diagnosis of the perceptual and existential fatigue induced by the encyclopedic museum. Writing in the early 20th century, Valéry addresses a model of museum developed predominantly in the 18th and 19th centuries, designed to accumulate, classify, and monumentalize cultural heritage. He finds the experience of these institutions exhausting and disconnected from life, describing them as spaces where artworks are stripped from their context, densely clustered, and placed under the authority of a silent, immobilized gaze. The museum, for Valéry, is a place of conflicting logics, at once temple, school, salon, and cemetery, where the aura of art becomes suffocating rather than elevating. He writes: "These shrines to the arts are also places of death, where artworks come to rest, removed from the stream of life." [1].

Theodor Adorno, in his essay "Valéry Proust Museum" [2], engages directly with Valéry's critique, expanding and deepening it within the framework of critical theory. Adorno identifies the museum as a bourgeois institution embedded in the logic of cultural domination. For him, the act of musealization is one of separation: it removes the object from lived experience and aesthetic immediacy, placing it in a sterilized domain governed by the ideology of cultural value. He famously compares museums to mausoleums, spaces where art, once vital, becomes a relic, a fetish of its own transcendence [2]. Yet, Adorno is not merely dismissive. He acknowledges the aporetic nature of the museum: while it domesticates and neutralizes the artwork, it also offers a space for historical reflection and critical remembrance.

Crucially, both Valéry and Adorno direct their critiques at the pre-modern or traditional museum model, which predates the rise of the white cube. These museums, such as the Louvre, the British Museum, and the Alte Pinakothek, emerge from Enlightenment ideals and serve the nationalist, pedagogical, and classificatory impulses of 18th- and 19th-century Europe. Their galleries are often crowded, their taxonomies rigid, and their narratives unified under a teleology of civilizational progress. The museum in this context is encyclopedic, monumental, and implicitly hierarchical.By contrast, Douglas Crimp and Brian O'Doherty address the modernist and postmodernist transformation of the exhibition space. Crimp's essay "On the Museum's Ruins" [3] charts the breakdown of modernist autonomy and purity in the face of institutional critique and conceptual art. He argues that the museum, once the bastion of formalist modernism, has become an ideological apparatus, complicit in the commodification and containment of critical artistic practices. Drawing on Foucault and Barthes, Crimp exposes the discursive and power-laden operations behind curatorial and spatial strategies.

Brian O'Doherty, in his influential series Inside the White Cube [4], analyzes the architectural and phenomenological constraints imposed by the modernist gallery. The white cube, with its seamless walls, absence of windows, and suppression of context, claims to offer a neutral field for aesthetic contemplation. In reality, it constructs a rigid mode of spectatorship, a purified, disembodied gaze aligned with modernist ideologies of autonomy and timelessness. O'Doherty demonstrates how this spatial regime frames the artwork and the viewer alike, producing a highly codified and exclusionary aesthetic experience.

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Despite the historical and conceptual differences among these thinkers, certain convergences can be observed. All four are concerned with the tension between art and life, between the aesthetic object and its context, and between institutional frameworks and subjective experience. Valéry and Adorno denounce the severance of the artwork from the pulse of lived existence, viewing the museum as a site of aesthetic ossification. Crimp and O'Doherty, in turn, critique the illusion of neutrality and universality in modernist display, revealing how exhibition spaces discipline perception and encode ideological values.

What unites these perspectives is a shared skepticism toward the museum's claim to preserve and elevate art, when in fact it may isolate and reify it. Whether through the crowded halls of the traditional museum or the sanitized geometry of the white cube, the exhibition space emerges as a medium not of aesthetic immediacy but of constructed distance. The artwork, in all these accounts, risks becoming a symbol of detachment, an object displaced from the world it once inhabited.This legacy of critique informs contemporary reflections on new exhibition models, especially in response to the ecological, technological, and social transformations of the 21st century. The emergence of installations such as Olafur Eliasson's Life signals a desire to undo the boundaries that separate art from environment, body from space, and institution from experience, a desire shaped in part by the very histories these thinkers illuminate.

3. Life as immersive ecosystem

Life transformed the Fondation Beyeler into a hybrid space, half artwork, half biotope, displacing not only curatorial conventions but the very ontology of exhibition. The intervention began with a simple but radical gesture: the removal of the glass façade of the south wing of the Fondation Beyeler building. This architectural subtraction rendered the institutional interior porous, vulnerable, and continuous with the external landscape. The resulting space was flooded with a shallow layer of water, dyed a luminous green through the use of uranine, a fluorescent dye used in hydrological studies [5]. This water flowed seamlessly through the museum galleries and into the adjacent park, dissolving distinctions between constructed environment and natural world.

Photographic documentation (see Figures 1-3) reveals the scale and delicacy of this intervention. The architecture, once defined by containment, became a corridor for light and air. Diurnal cycles visibly shaped the exhibition's atmosphere: during the day, the space glowed under sunlight, its water surface rippling in response to passing winds or visitors' movements; at night, it was illuminated from below, giving rise to ethereal reflections that transformed the institution into a spectral landscape.

Figure 1. View of life during the day [6]

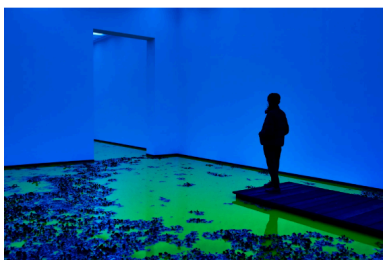

Figure 2. View of life during the night [6]

Inside this aquatic chamber, aquatic plants (water lilies, reeds, grasses) were arranged not as ornament but as ecological collaborators (Figures 1-3). Their growth and distribution changed with

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time, weather, and temperature, introducing an element of botanical agency into the artwork. The museum's interior thus became a terrain of photosynthesis, decay, humidity, and silence, conditions often excluded from the climate-controlled sanctuaries of modernist art institutions.

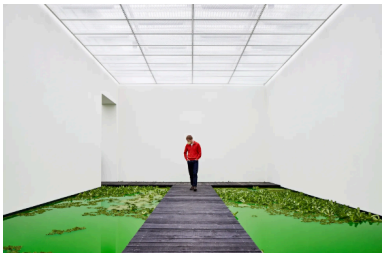

Figure 3. Aquatic plants and spatial configuration of life [6]

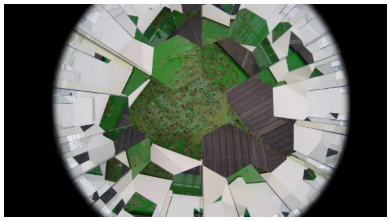

Figure 4. Livestream still from the life exhibition [6]

Visitors navigated the edges of this flooded space via narrow wooden walkways and platforms, always at the mercy of splashes, breezes, and the occasional bird passing through an open wall. The exhibition was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with no formal entry point [5]. There were no tickets, no doors, no artificial barriers between viewer and environment. The absence of threshold reconfigured not only access but also temporality. Many visitors returned multiple times to witness the installation under changing weather, at different times of day, or in the company of different species. As shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3, human presence was subtle and interstitial: people paused, stood in silence, watched birds land on railings, or peered into the fluorescence of the water, unsure if what they witnessed was nature, art, or something in between.

Technology played a decisive role in reinforcing this ambiguity. As illustrated in Figures 4, digital cameras, some hovering from above, others embedded at water level, broadcasted the installation live through an online platform [5]. These livestreams offered not just documentation but altered phenomenology. One could view Life from the imagined perspective of a fish or bird, from within the leaves or beneath the water's surface. This multiplicity of viewpoints displaced the primacy of human spectatorship and reframed the museum as a sensory relay: not a frame for art, but an interface for distributed perception. Life achieves a moment of radical horizontality, where species, elements, and technologies coexist without hierarchy. The museum, once a site of elevation and distinction, became a shared habitat, an arena of coexistence and vulnerability.

In sum, Life was not an exhibition in the traditional sense. It lacked objects, labels, explanatory texts, and aesthetic distance. It did not unfold within the logic of chronology or thematic curation. Instead, it emerged as an environment in flux, a living, breathing, and slowly evolving organism that asked visitors to attune their senses, to stay longer, to return, to feel. Its materials were light, water, pigment, air, time, presence. Its message was not declared but enacted: the museum can become otherwise.

4. Olafur Eliasson's life: flooding the museum, opening the institution

The exhibition Life must be read not simply as a gesture of critique but as an act of institutional transformation. Occurring in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the exhibition responded directly to a world reeling from lockdowns, social isolation, and the heightened perception of enclosed, air-conditioned environments as spaces of risk. The experience of confinement brought into question the nature of space itself, its porosity, ventilation, and capacity to sustain human and

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non-human life. Eliasson, already known for his work on perception and the environment, proposed a radical response: open the museum to the elements.

The Fondation Beyeler, an institution historically committed to modern and contemporary art, became the site of a spatial and ontological experiment. Eliasson removed the glass facade of the museum's south wing, allowing water to flood the interior spaces. The resulting environment consisted of fluorescent green, pigment-infused water, local aquatic vegetation, and continuous exposure to the elements. The museum no longer mediated the natural world through representation; it became an ecosystem in itself. The project was accessible 24 hours a day, free of charge, without entrance doors or security checkpoints. Human visitors shared the space with birds, insects, and the cycles of weather and light.

Significantly, Life did not eliminate technology, it integrated it. A series of digital cameras was installed throughout the exhibition, some submerged at the waterline, others placed high in the surrounding trees. These livestreamed the exhibition continuously to a global audience, dissolving the boundaries between physical and virtual spectatorship. The viewer could access the installation from the perspective of a bird, a fish, or a drifting leaf. The use of these non-human perspectives subverted the anthropocentric gaze of traditional museology and redefined the act of looking as a form of ecological participation.

This strategy aligns with anthropologist Natasha Myers' proposal for a transition from the Anthropocene to the Planthroposcene, a vision of the future in which vegetal life co-constitutes the conditions of perception and sociality [7]. Myers calls for a "vegetalization of sensorium," an invitation to attend to the ways plants and ecosystems perceive, communicate, and structure experience. Eliasson's Life, by inviting viewers to co-inhabit a space of multispecies presence, renders this proposition tangible.

Rather than designing an exhibition to be viewed, Eliasson created a living interface [5]. The exhibition did not tell a story; it hosted life. The curatorial gesture became ecological, performative, and durational. This model reverses the logic of the white cube, where artworks are isolated from contingency. In Life, the work is the contingency. The artwork cannot be reduced to an object or an image, it is an event, an evolving assemblage of organic, architectural, meteorological, and technological forces.

This intervention must be understood as a direct response to the critiques advanced by Valéry, Adorno, Crimp, and O'Doherty. The contemporary art institution is no longer a mausoleum, a ruin, or a white cube; it becomes a floodplain, a commons, a site of cohabitation. It no longer separates art from life, but insists on their inseparability. And in doing so, it reconfigures what the museum and the art institution can be, not a repository of dead forms, but a porous membrane between worlds.

5. Conclusion: the museum after the flood

The exhibition Life by Olafur Eliasson enacts rather than merely illustrates a transformation in the function and ontology of art institutions. It performs the undoing of the institutional, architectural, and epistemological boundaries that thinkers such as Valéry, Adorno, Crimp, and O'Doherty critiqued [1-4]. While their analyses targeted the encyclopedic museum and the modernist white cube, Eliasson tests these conditions within the framework of the Fondation Beyeler, a private art foundation that nonetheless reproduces museum-like regimes of display and authority.

Rather than maintaining the institution as a neutral zone for contemplative spectatorship, Life presents it as a permeable and participatory environment, vulnerable to weather, inhabited by non-human species, and accessible beyond the framework of regulated visitation. In this process, Life dissolves, albeit temporarily and within curatorial mediation, the historical separation between art

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and life that each of these critics identified as fundamental to museological regimes. For Valéry, the museum is a cemetery for severed meanings; for Adorno, a mausoleum for reified cultural forms; for Crimp, a site of modernist purification; and for O'Doherty, a white cube that abstracts the body and politicizes invisibility. Eliasson's intervention suspends and reconfigures these conditions, not through symbolic critique alone, but through the literal flooding of the foundation's galleries, collapsing structural codes of separation and proposing a new relational paradigm.

The model of exhibition proposed by Life is ecological, temporal, and ethical. It refuses fixed boundaries and embraces multiplicity, transience, and interaction. The visitor is not a passive viewer but a co-habitant; the artwork is not an object but a dynamic interface; and the institution itself is not a sanctuary of high culture but a responsive environment, open to contingency, change, and co-creation.

In an era marked by climate emergency, pandemics, and calls for decolonial restructuring, Life offers a compelling model for what cultural institutions might become. It does not abandon the museum as an idea, but reframes it within a broader ecology of practice. The Fondation Beyeler thus becomes more than a place, it becomes a testing ground, a practice of sensing, of coexisting, of transforming. A site where art is not only shown but lived.

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