

# ***Looking into the Light: Examining the Apparatus in Contemporary Art***

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of the technical apparatus in the creation and mediation of experience in contemporary art. A model of the apparatus is adapted from Vilem Flusser's use of the term in relation to photography and 'technical images'. This idea of the apparatus is then used as an interpretive lens to consider the experiential focus of artists Carsten Holler and Olafur Eliasson. The models of subjectivity put forward by these artists are discussed, with reference to the histories of the apparatus they use. In this way, I contend that the 'lens' of the technical apparatus can be applied to develop fresh insights into a range of contemporary art practices.

## Introduction

*I consider the works as sort of 'phenomena-producers', like machines, or stage sets [...] I need some media, I need some 'stuff' to create a situation. I need a machine to create a phenomenon in order to have an experience.*

Olafur Eliasson, 2000<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenal experience of the viewer is a central concern in much contemporary art, which in turn utilises a variety of technologies to create its special and spatial effects, as foregrounded in these statements by Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson's reference to these phenomena-producing machines as 'media' suggests that the apparatus is itself the medium, both in the sense that it provides the material support for the work, and in that it frames and mediates the viewer's experience *in* the work.

I would argue that there is a very particular model of subjectivity in relation to the apparatus as it appears in contemporary works. This argument pivots on the theorisation of the apparatus itself. In this paper, I will examine one model of the apparatus, adapted from the philosophical work of Vilém Flusser, to discuss the relation of science and technology to the visual apparatus. The practices of Carsten Holler and Olafur Eliasson exercise both the rhetoric and the physical form of the apparatus; this usage will be historically grounded with reference to entertainment technologies of early modernity, which are in turn related to the emergence of Flusser's category of 'technical images'.

Flusser's theorisation of the apparatus is of relevance to such installation practices because of his thoughts on the place of 'meaning' in technical images. The shift in emphasis from meaning to experience<sup>2</sup> requires a corresponding shift in criticism. It becomes necessary, as Flusser states, 'start not from the tip of the vector of meaning but from the bow from which the arrow was shot. Criticism of technical images requires an analysis of their trajectory and an analysis of the intention behind it. And this intention lies in the link, the suture of the apparatus that produced them with the envisioners who produced them'.<sup>3</sup>

This paper seeks to examine the trajectory of the apparatus in the thought of Vilém Flusser and in the works of Carsten Holler and Olafur Eliasson, and to explore those points where their paths cross.

## Working Notes on the Apparatus: Towards the Philosophy of Vilem Flusser

In his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser defines the apparatus as an object that simulates *thought*,<sup>4</sup> as distinct from tools and machines, which both simulate actions of the body.<sup>5</sup> In this way, while tools and machines approach Marshal McLuhan's theory of media as 'extensions of man'<sup>6</sup>, in Flusser's conception the apparatus has a *symbolic* function; its purpose is 'not to change the world but to change the *meaning* of the world'<sup>7</sup>. Approaching this definition from another angle, that of the viewer, we might also say that the machine deals with physical matter, whereas the apparatus acts upon the mind through the perception of its audience.<sup>8</sup>

This is borne out by Flusser's inversion of traditional photographic semiotics; rather than traces 'stencilled directly off the real', as they might be by a machine such as a printing press, photographic and other 'technical images' are *processed* by the apparatus, translated from visual phenomena into symbols. In this way, the apparatus is a means of bestowing meaning; 'It is not what is shown in a technical image but rather the technical image itself that is the message.'<sup>9</sup>

This turn of phrase echoes the thinking of McLuhan, but in Flusser the former's sense of utopian connectivity is tempered by a healthy scepticism for the anaesthetising effects of spectacle. For Flusser, the apparatus is neither inherently utopian nor inevitably fascistic, but has tendencies towards both. Thus, it is necessary to create new possibilities outside of the predetermined 'program'; to 'not play with' the apparatus 'but against it ... to bring to light the tricks concealed within.'<sup>10</sup> The imperatives to re-purpose, play and experiment with the apparatus are a means of achieving a productive (rather than passive) engagement with culture.

I suggest that just such an experimental and experiential engagement with the apparatus beyond signifying conventions of photography or film, in contemporary works, such as those by Carsten Holler and Olafur Eliasson, that employ distinct forms of the apparatus. My intention here is not to

subsume the work of these artists under the logic of the apparatus, but instead use the discussion outlined above as an interpretive lens through which to gain new insights into their work.

### Confusion machines in the laboratory of doubt – Carsten Holler

*My objects are tools or devices with a specified use, which is to create a moment of slight confusion or to induce hallucinations in the widest sense. That is why I call them confusion machines.* Carsten Holler, 2001<sup>11</sup>

The 'confusion machines' of Carsten Holler act upon the perception and psychology of their viewers, often in unsettling or disturbing ways. Despite this, his works are often framed and discussed in terms of Relational Aesthetics and a 'fun-house version of contemporary art', with emphasis on their dual nature as "part science-fair project, part theme-park attraction."<sup>12</sup> Holler's practice does indeed enact the spectacle of science in the gallery, with the controlled conditions of the white cube substituting for those of the laboratory. In contrast to the traditional view of the laboratory, Holler himself characterises this as a 'laboratory of doubt'; not a site for the pursuit of scientific truth, but for its undoing.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly opposed to the conventional wisdom of objectivity, Flusser characterises the production of technical images as a 'phenomenology of doubt.'<sup>14</sup> The apparatus, and the 'Universe of Technical Images' it produces, compartmentalise phenomena; engaging with the apparatus requires that we move between these compartments, making decisions in relation to the apparatus and according to its rules. But this doubt takes a particular form and has a scientific measure: 'Like the photographer's decision, his doubt is quantic: neither the existential doubt of man, nor the methodical doubt of science, but a doubt composed of point-like instants.'<sup>15</sup>

Holler has spoken of his own doubt-filled decision making, which is 'almost a medical problem', and at the same time the desire to maintain his artist and scientist selves; 'to become schizophrenic – but not in a medical way', but rather in the sense of 'being a double specialist'.<sup>16</sup> These dualistic tendencies result in a series of doubles and reiterations throughout his practice, ranging

from the formal arrangements of works to the production of entirely mirror-image exhibitions in the one space.<sup>17</sup> Holler's phenomenological doubt negates compartmentalisation; the inability to decide 'in front of an infinite number of possibilities', promotes multiplicity.<sup>18</sup>

This indecisive doubt also manifests, perhaps, in Holler's wavering between the utopian and sinister aspects of scientific progress; between his proposal of slides as an environmentally friendly large-scale transport system, and the "almost dictatorial" relationship to fun that they enable.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, Holler asserts that his interest in fun occupies 'a theoretical viewpoint'.<sup>20</sup> This serious concern for fun finds a significant precursor in Roger Caillois' theorisation of play, which in turn points to a link between the 'science-fair' and 'theme park' parts of Holler's practice.

In his analysis and categorisation of fun, Caillois writes of games that 'are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness'.<sup>21</sup> In transforming the subject from lucid to ludic, such vertiginous play operates against, not with, the construction of reality.

Caillois goes on to suggest that the diversions of the machine age brings this subversive element to the fore: 'In order to give this kind of sensation the intensity and brutality capable of shocking adults, powerful machines have had to be invented. [...] It is now provided for the avid masses by thousands of stimulating contraptions installed at fairs and amusement parks'.<sup>22</sup> It would seem paradoxical that in the work of Carsten Holler, it is not only the exhilarating rush of his slides, but also the infinitesimally slow creep of his modified carousel that induces vertigo in its audiences.

Yet despite our current associations of modernity with the speed of futurism, the scientific discipline of kinematics, concerned with the study of mechanical motion, distinguished between motion and velocity. As Lynda Nead has shown, kinematics played itself out not only in the developing scientific applications of technical images (exemplified by the work of Etienne Jules-

Marey), but also in the popular entertainments of fairground attractions, including the pedestrian diversions of the mechanical staircase and the moving pavement.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Nead could be describing Holler's work when she suggests that the new technologies of fairground entertainment transformed the spectator into a participant.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the sense of participatory spectatorship so central to the practice of Carsten Holler might be seen not as a function of an opposition between science and fun, but of their coming together in the form of an apparatus.

This apparatus, whether sensory deprivation chamber, upside-down goggles or slide, directs its energies inwards towards the viewer, playing against perception in order to transform the subject. In the work of Olafur Eliasson, transformation is also the goal, but here the apparatus is turned outward.

#### Better Seeing Through Spectacles – the Natural Magic of Olafur Eliasson

*If the public gets involved in a stimulating situation, the situation "commits itself" in return. There's a reversal of subject and object here: the viewer becomes the object and the context becomes the subject. I always try to turn the viewer into what's on show, make him mobile and dynamic.* Olafur Eliasson, 2000<sup>25</sup>

Olafur Eliasson's immersive installations focus on experiences that are produced by means of an apparatus. The ensuing spectacles make a spectacle of their viewers in turn, producing the reversal of subject and object referred to above. But there is more to this reversal than the accidental performances of audience members, and it is bound up in the dynamic of apparatus and experience.

Vilem Flusser writes that technical images (images produced by means of apparatus) are projections; 'they must be decoded not as representations of things out in the world but as signposts directed outward. It is their projector, their program, that is the object of criticism. What technical images show depends on which direction they are pointing'.<sup>26</sup> This relationship finds literal form in the immersive installations of Olafur Eliasson, which often feature an

apparatus at their centre, producing what might be described as real-time-and-space technical images.

In this situation, the viewer's experience is organised around the apparatus, with a clear separation between the object and its effects; the apparatus points past the viewer, into the space, much like a film projector. In works such as *Colour Square Sphere* (2009), for example, the viewer must turn their back on the apparatus in order to see its effects, or else oscillate between the two in a dialectical viewing experience.

At the same time, Eliasson's 'meta-scientific' 'appropriations of natural science'<sup>27</sup> are not intended to create a perfect illusion, but rather to reveal the illusory nature of representation itself. Eliasson states his works are 'about structures that pretend or make us believe that we're outside, experiencing the piece, but in fact we're inside, behind the glass, not experiencing anything other than an image'.<sup>28</sup>

How might we define this conceptual model of a scopic apparatus? It possesses an objectifying gaze, restructures architectural relationships and positions itself as viewing subject, revealing visibility as a trap for its viewer. It is a model that recalls another formulation of the apparatus, that of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as discussed by Michel Foucault.<sup>29</sup> We might then describe Eliasson's model as that of a "convivial panopticon"; a laboratory not of power, but of engagement, in which the seeing/being seen dyad is not dissociated but superseded by the artist's doctrine of 'seeing yourself seeing'.<sup>30</sup>

It is thus a model that does not place the viewer behind glass, but rather reveals this as the default position of perception. In this, it pursues what Flusser describes as the essential critical project in relation to technical images: 'to show that in defiance of common sense, they are not mirrors but projections that are programmed to make common sense appear mirrorlike'.<sup>31</sup> Eliasson's work does this by revealing its own illusory nature, and by extension demonstrating the constructed nature of all perception.

This demystifying turn links Eliasson's illusory natural wonders to other traditions contemporaneous to Bentham's Panopticon and to the emergence of technical image apparatuses in the late 1800s; the natural magic of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the phantasmagoria and the 'Mechanical Magic' of the late 1800s. Both Tom Gunning and Lynda Nead have written of the relationship (for better and worse) between such magical pursuits and early cinema. This 'world of illusions and entertainments, the display of curiosities and extraordinary devices, [...] spectacular demonstrations of electricity, magnetism, and optical phenomenon' both informed the development and influenced the perceptions of early cinema.<sup>32</sup>

The important feature of these quasi-scientific displays is their emphasis on demystification, with performances being preceded by and incorporating acknowledgement and explanation of the illusory nature of their spectacle, often aligning these fields of 'honest illusion' with the latest advances in science and technology. In the same way, Eliasson's practice distances itself from the culture of spectacle and excess by revealing his tricks and positioning the visual apparatus of the viewer in relation to the technical apparatus of the work.

This reflexive and transformative positioning of the viewer, enacted through an engagement with the apparatus, is central to the practices of Carsten Holler and Olafur Eliasson. In breaking down distinctions between object and subject by employing scientific principles and technological forms, the work of these artists also transforms our relationship to those disciplines. They create a situation in which, as in Vilem Flusser's assessment, 'science will be seen as a kind of art (as an intersubjective fiction), and art will be seen as a kind of science (as an intersubjective source of knowledge)'.<sup>33</sup>

In the works of Holler and Eliasson, it is through the apparatus, with its dynamics of perception, play, doubt, reflection and projection, that this intersubjectivity is revealed. I have sought here to trace these qualities back through the apparatus and, like these artists, to utilize the apparatus as a means of seeing these relationships anew.

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<sup>1</sup> Olafur Eliasson in conversation with Daniel Birnbaum, pp. 175-190 in *Press Play: Artists in Conversation*, 2006, London: Phaidon Press, pp. 179, 185

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Dorothea von Hantelmann, *I*, in Jessica Morgan (ed.), *Carsten Holler: Test Site*, 2006, London: Tate Publishing

<sup>3</sup> Vilem Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 2011, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 49

<sup>4</sup> Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 2000, London: Reaktion Books, p. 83

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>6</sup> Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, London: Sphere Books

<sup>7</sup> Flusser, *op. cit.*, p. 36

<sup>8</sup> It is a significant feature of Flusser's philosophy that his is not an aesthetic theory addressing the composition of specific images, but an analysis of the culture in which media operate. Thus this is a necessarily simplified outline of the apparatus, discussed in isolation from this systematic 'program'.

<sup>9</sup> Flusser, 2011, p. 49

<sup>10</sup> Flusser, 2000, p. 27

<sup>11</sup> Carsten Holler Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, pp. 401-410 in Thomas Boutoux (ed.), *Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews Volume 1*, 2003, Milan: Charta Editions, p. 409

<sup>12</sup> Lars Bang Larsen, *Carsten Holler: Experience (Exhibition Preview)*, p. 141 in *Artforum*, Vol. 50 Issue 1, September 2011

<sup>13</sup> *Laboratory of Doubt* was a work made by Holler in 1999 as part of *Laboratorium*, an exhibition at the Provinciaal Museum voor Fotografie, Antwerp, exploring crossovers between art and science. The phrase has since become a descriptor for his practice as a whole.

<sup>14</sup> Flusser, 2000, p. 38

<sup>15</sup> Vilem Flusser, *Photo-production*, 1984, Lecture Notes published through Flusser Studies online journal: [www.flusserstudies.net](http://www.flusserstudies.net)

<sup>16</sup> Carsten Holler, *Kinshasa Rumba Brazzaville*, pp. 129-135 in Nicholas Bourriaud (ed.), *Altermodern*, 2008, London: Tate Publishing, pp. 134; 130

<sup>17</sup> Carsten Holler, *Une Exposition a Marseille*, 2003, Musee D'Art Contemporain, Marseille

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

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<sup>21</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 1958, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, p. 23. Caillois' text was reproduced in: Carsten Holler (ed.), *Test Site Source Book*, 2006, London: Tate Publishing

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26

<sup>23</sup> Presaging Holler's proposals for slides as public transport, the mechanical staircase debuted as a fairground ride at Coney Island in 1897, before being adapted for more functional use as the 'escalateur' for the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900.

<sup>24</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900*, 2007, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Olafur Eliasson, pp. 17-37 in Joseph Jacquet (ed.) *Olafur Eliasson: Chaque matin je me sens différent. Chaque soir je me sens le meme* 2002, Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, pp. 32

<sup>26</sup> Flusser, 2011, p. 49

<sup>27</sup> Christa Steinle and Peter Wiebel, *Editorial*, pp. 12-16 in *Olafur Eliasson: Surroundings Surrounded: Essays on Space and Science*, 2001, Boston: MIT Press, p. 16. This notion of Eliasson's practice as a 'meta-science' contrasts with its frequent characterisation as 'quasi-scientific'. For a discussion of this framing, see Eliasson's conversation with Philip Ursprung and Anna Engberg-Pedersen under the entry "quasi" in *Studio Olafur Eliasson: An Encyclopedia*, 2008, Cologne: Taschen.

<sup>28</sup> Eliasson in conversation with Birnbaum, 2000, p. 183

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975, New York: Vintage Books

<sup>30</sup> This is a phrase that features prominently and frequently in discussions of Eliasson's work, relating directly to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

<sup>31</sup> Flusser, 2011, p. 49

<sup>32</sup> Tom Gunning, *To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision*, pp. 94-127 in *Grey Room*, Issue 26, Winter 2007, p. 101. See also Nead, *op. cit.*, p. 83

<sup>33</sup> Vilem Flusser, *Memory Electronic and otherwise*, 1990 pp. 397-399 in *Leonardo*, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 399