

SURROUNDINGS SURROUNDED: ESSAYS ON SPACE AND SCIENCE

edited by Peter Weibel. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, U.S.A., and London, U.K., 2002. 719 pp., illus. Paper, \$34.95 ISBN 0-262-73148-7.

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Although produced in conjunction with Olafur Eliasson's show *Surroundings Surrounded* at the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum (Graz, Austria) and ZKM/Center for Art and Media (Karlsruhe, Germany), *Surroundings Surrounded: Essays on Space and Science* is not a conventional catalog published to comment on the exhibition. Instead, and at Eliasson's request, the artist's work was interspersed with a number of essays, in lieu of a catalog. The resulting mosaic contains over 60 scholarly articles, many of which are reprints of previously published work, and the collection exposes the reader to a number of ideas that have influenced Eliasson's work. As Eliasson explains: "We spoke about collecting all my favorite matters into one system just like a studiolo, where the idea of the all-encompassing everything is organized as artifacts and objects in small systems and structures." The resulting "studiolo" gathers the work of many who investigate our understanding and perception of spatial relations, physical environments and other time-space related structures and concepts. Due to his decision to have the art function as an insert or interface to the individual chapters, I found the images almost secondary in the final product.

Perhaps it is because the book is both an anthology and an exhibition catalog that I find it so difficult to review. Based on Eliasson's epilogue it seems this publication met Eliasson's intentions and his goals as an artist. Yet, as a reader who had been hoping to learn more about Eliasson's art, I was disappointed to find that so little within the encyclopedic anthology connected me with his art, although there was some measure of success. The excellent reproductions do expose the reader to

the beauty of his work, and these images also shed some light on how Eliasson combines the ephemeral, natural effects of light, water and wind with more tangible materials such as wood, moss and grass. Nonetheless, the commentaries did nothing to aid my understanding of what it is like to actually be face to face with the elegance he contrives. My belief that the book doesn't actively invite the reader to experience the art came to the fore when I began to write this review. I turned to the table of contents and, when I looked closely, discovered that the articles were not listed in the order in which they appear in the book. Instead, the order within each section seems to have been randomly generated. Given my exposure to Eliasson's interest in urging us to look closely at what we see, and my failure to find any elevating rationale on studying the format, I was led to conclude that this non-linear list was provided simply as a device to remind us of one of our assumptions about order. In my case, the reminder did not strike me as a particularly illuminating one. Perhaps I missed what I was supposed to uncover, and this explains why I concluded that, rather than leading me to a stimulating insight, the challenge posed by the enforced disorder, instead, seemed trivial, annoying, unnecessary and intrusive. It is not difficult to adapt to this kind of disjunction between reality and expectations. Being compelled to adapt does not strike me as being particularly creative or even a useful artistic device.

In summary, this book is most likely to be of interest to those who share Eliasson's intellectual inclinations. Clearly the articles are tied to his sensitivities. They also, in fact, cover areas of great interest to me as a reader. Yet I believe that those who turn to this book to learn more about Eliasson's art will find little contained in the book that explicitly illuminates his projects. The sourcebook approach makes the challenge of relating to his work more of an intellectual one, and this, in turn, seems to isolate his interspersed work from the text surrounding it. It is left to the reader to attempt to conceptualize (or imagine) how the ideas of the collection's authors are actually made manifest in the art. A large selection of images is included, but those who have not experienced Eliasson's work directly will find the well-produced visuals hard to translate in the small-format views. Unfortunately this lengthy volume does little to help acquaint the

reader with what it might be like to view the work. There is no commentary to walk the reader through the installations and aid her in acquiring a sense of the scale. In addition, there is little attempt to capture how the installations were conceived, to visualize the relationships in real space, or to understand how engagement in real time and real space would actually affect a person who could walk around within the environment, see the work in the light and dynamically view it from many positions. It strikes me as odd that this artist who seems intent on encouraging people to participate with his art would choose to produce this kind of publication in lieu of a catalog. As one who came to the book hoping to learn how Eliasson translates the questions of interest to him into his projects, I was disappointed to find a contrived package, rather than a tool aimed at elevating our experience of the art. In fairness, my reaction might speak to the fact that I bring a different vantage point to his work than he does. While this work is a fine encyclopedic anthology, I would have preferred a catalog.

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