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## **AFTER IMAGES OF THE PRESENT. UTOPIAN IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES**

Whatever we do, it could be different. The painting of a picture is never finished; the writing of a book is never completed. The conclusion of what we have just printed out could still be changed. And if it came to that, then the effort would start from the beginning.<sup>1</sup>

The introductory quote is taken from Ernst Bloch's short essay on the humanist and political writings of Berthold Brecht. "Brecht wants to change the audience itself through his products, so the changed audience [...] also

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<sup>1</sup> Bloch, E. (1938). A Leninist of the Stage. *Heritage of Our Times* (1991). Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 229.



has retroactive effect on the products".<sup>2</sup> This would be the ideal effect of an artwork engaging in real social life and actively transforming it. The desire to change the world into a better, freer, and balanced place is not just the driving force of critical and socially engaged actions but also an immanent feature of utopian thought. However, this ideal and accomplished social whole (as imagined by the historical avant-gardes) is evasive and not yet to be attained. It is non-existent or *ou-topic* on the map of reality. Whenever the promise (of utopian realisation) tried to take on an actual social form, it failed—as manifested in the political projects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their horrific consequences—and ended retrospectively in distorting the utopian dream into a dystopian reality. So Bloch's introduction refers to utopia (or rather different types of utopia) as a symbolic space, always consisting of *lack*<sup>3</sup> that originates from the gaps in the process of fulfilment. Therefore, the concept of utopia is an open and undefined *topos*,<sup>4</sup> always relating to specific and alternating sociohistorical contexts. Utopia is hence enjoying radical redefinition, because, as stated by Stephen Duncombe, "there is no consensus on what a 'good' Utopia will look like or on how to determine when we have actually

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See also: Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno in conversation with Horst Krüger. Bloch, E., Adorno, T.W. (1964). *Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing*. In: Bloch, E. (1989). *Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Selected Essays*. Cambridge-London: MIT Press, pp. 1–17.

<sup>4</sup> Utopia as an expression is ambiguous in itself. *Utopia* by Thomas More is a real place, topographically defined, measured, and described in detail. On the other hand, it is a made-up word composed by More from the Greek word (*ou*)*topos*, literally meaning *no-place*. According to Stephen Duncombe in his introductory essay to Thomas More's *Utopia*, it is *some-place* and *no-place*, real and fictitious at the same time. Utopia can be an ideal place promising a better life or a phantasmagorical setting, an apparition, working through a "dialectical operation between fact and fiction". Particularly "this curious state of being and not being, a place that is also no-place", as Duncombe claims, is what makes *Utopia* an open concept, stimulating our imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be and figure out new possibilities. In: Thomas More, *Open/Utopia*. Edited and with an introduction by Stephen Duncombe. Duncombe, S. (ed.) (2012). *Open Utopia*. Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, Introduction, pp. xxxii–xliv.

imagined or created one".<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the content of utopia changes according to existing social conditions, there is a common ground, accurately defined by Ernst Bloch as yearning and hope,<sup>6</sup> and their motivation is precisely what the existing situation lacks. Due to *lack*, both Adorno and Bloch, recognise the essential function of utopia in the critique of the existent.<sup>7</sup> Utopian vision does not only refer to the distant, forthcoming and (yet) unattainable, but is always projected from the presence, deriving from the confrontation between the envisioned and the not yet fulfilled. The utopian fantasy is an *afterimage* that arises from looking into the real world, from where utopia derives. The topography of utopia as a no-place is paradoxically defined by the frames and boundaries of our empirical, lived world that the utopian vision wishes to surpass.

Despite the fact that utopian visions derive from uneasiness in the presence, Stephen Duncombe, above all, ascribes the critical motive mainly to their antipode—dystopia that operates by revealing the hidden logic of what already exists, for dystopias conjure up a world in which no one wants to believe.<sup>8</sup> The ideological structure of uniform and universal utopia that tried to equate "essence with existence"<sup>9</sup>, both in humanistically motivated avant-

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Postscripts, liv.

<sup>6</sup> Bloch, E. (1986). *The Principle of Hope*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; see also Bloch E. and Adorno, T. Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing. In: Bloch, E. (1989). *Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Selected Essays*. [op. cit.], p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bloch E. and Adorno, T. (1964). Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing. In: Bloch, E. (1989). *Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Selected Essays*. [op. cit.], p. 12. Adorno claims that utopia is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretising itself as something false, it always points at the same time to what it should be.

<sup>8</sup> "Dystopian imaginaries, while positing a scenario set in the future, always return to the present with a critical impulse—suggesting what must be curtailed if the world is not to end up the way it is portrayed." Cf: Duncombe, S. (2012). *Open Utopia*, [op. cit.] p. xix.

<sup>9</sup> Drago Bajt in the accompanying text to the Slovene translation of Zamyatin's novel *We*. In: Zamyatin, J. (1988). *Mi*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, p. 35.

garde projects (suprematism, constructivism, De Stijl) and totalitarian political plans (fascism, Stalinism) turned out to be infeasible. The imposed law of the static order, purest reason, and authority of the Benefactor, as illustrated by the One State in Zamyatin's anti-utopian novel *We*, announces the end of belief in the absolute social totality, suitable for all, that could eliminate division. Referring to another historical context—the time of rising Nazism—let us remember the melody of the song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" from the film *Cabaret*. The optimistic voice of a young Aryan man, echoing the unshakable belief in future, is gradually joined by all the other voices. But as viewers, having a retrospective insight into the future, we can recognise the horrible yield of the reverse utopian vision. Looking backwards, every collective social ideology turned out to be *a priori* dystopic. Yet the fact that a utopian motive is concurrently bound to its opposite must not be overlooked, as it holds a position which Adorno illustrated in his finding: "[I]nsofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is."<sup>10</sup> So utopia, unlike warning dystopias, describes hope, but lack guaranties, concrete scenarios, and foremost, supposedly there is always a category of risk to it, which can turn out as disappointment.<sup>11</sup>

So what is left for utopia and what kind of images does it have in contemporary art? Art can be attributed an immanent utopian dimension from the philosophical perspective. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch writes that the entire art is focused on creating images that would become symbols of perfection.<sup>12</sup> Adorno advocates the autonomy of art, as it enables art to open a field of imagined freedom and alterity that is in opposition with the present

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<sup>10</sup> Bloch E. and Adorno, T. (1964). Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing. In: Bloch, E. (1989). *Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Selected Essays* [op. cit.], p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> See also Bloch. *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch, E. (1986). *The Principle of Hope*. [op. cit.], pp. 13–16.

and warns against its *lack*.<sup>13</sup> In the presently fragmented and dynamic world, utopia transforming the whole (in the sense of operating and organising a system of human togetherness) can no longer be imagined. In an era marked as post-utopian and post-historical, utopia is gradually being replaced by different concepts. Foucault opposes utopias as "unreal spaces" to real spaces of heterotopia that refer to real or mythic places within a society, including rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, museums, brothels, colonies, etc. Difference and alterity, which do not conform to the norm and are distinctly heterogeneous, can be established in the hinterland of these enclaves.<sup>14</sup> Foucault illustrates a heterotopian site par excellence with a ship or a boat, representing spatial ambiguity between something that occupies space and is yet a no-place—for him it is "a floating piece of space, a place without a place".<sup>15</sup> The ship is also a known romantic metaphor for uncertainty and being at the mercy of fate, exemplifying human life as a journey to the unknown driven by the longing for being in harmony with the world and in peace with oneself.

The dimension of this metaphor in art is probably most memorable in a project that went down in history by the death of its author. The Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader attempted to sail across the Atlantic in 1975 in his small boat *Ocean Wave* from Cape Code (Massachusetts) to the English coast. The art project that was supposed to end with an exhibition in a Dutch museum, after Ader's debark, was called *In Search of the Miraculous*. The question of which miracle was Bas Jan Ader hoping for—the miracle of transformation, epiphany, or just the happy end of a highly hazardous project—remains open. Nearly a year later, the vessel was found floating

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno writes about this in his renowned *Aesthetic Theory* (Adorno, T. (2002). *Aesthetic Theory*. London/New York: Continuum).

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, H. (1986). Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring), pp. 22–27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

along the Irish coast. Ader's project is based on the realisation of a personal phantasm, becoming a symbolic gesture through which the idea is fulfilled as an act. With the very conversion into the symbolic, as the artist's sea travel, commented Alexander Dumbadze, a part of life became a part of art.<sup>16</sup> It should be remembered that Ader's travel in terms of location is characterised by utopia, since historically utopian countries have been usually located on faraway islands and secluded, unexplored corners of the world coincidentally discovered by adventurers and seamen.<sup>17</sup> Yet the most utopian undertone of Ader's project derives from the belief that it is possible and from hope respectively that is "the opposite of security and naive optimism"<sup>18</sup> as it faces possible failure and eventual death as the ultimate limit of anti-utopia.

Topics which either way rehabilitate the utopian (or frequently dystopian) vision have become a significant reference in art during the last decades. As indicated in the anthology *Utopias*<sup>19</sup>, edited by Richard Noble, the conception of the utopian, both in terms of content and its various manifestations, entails a broad spectre.<sup>20</sup> We can talk about different types of utopia, but what all have generally in common is the dissent with the existent and the search for

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<sup>16</sup> Dumbadze, A. (2013). *Bas Jan Ader: Death is Elsewhere*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> Let us recall More's island of Utopia, Campanella's *City of the Sun*, or the island of Bensalem from Bacon's novel *New Atlantis*.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from Bloch. In: Bloch E. and Adorno, T. Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing. In: Bloch, E. (1989). *Utopian Function of Art and Literature, Selected Essays*. [op. cit.], p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Noble, R. (ed.) (2009). *Documents of Contemporary Art: Utopias*. London, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

<sup>20</sup> Despite a number of utopian strategies, Richard Noble in his preliminary essay *The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art* defines certain forms that tend to recur in utopian art, such as the use of the architectural models, the use of the manifesto, references to design and technology as well as small and large scale collaborative actions. According to Noble, utopian art is not so much defined with a common aesthetic form as it is with an attempt to model in some way the tension between an immanent critique of the present and the future, but above all most utopian art postulates models of other ways of being. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

alternative forms of social activities. This kind of projects approached as utopian are mostly experimental models of solving concrete situations and problems that either offer a concrete solution (e.g. the Danish art collective Superflex who worked with engineers and a sustainable agricultural organisation in Tanzania to develop an affordable biogas generator that turns human and animal waste into a gas fuel which were then set in African villages) or create a thought framework for a potential realisation of the solution in future (e.g. *Wheatfield* by American artist Agnes Denes, who in 1982 planted a wheat field in downtown Manhattan as a symbolic act of "an intrusion into the citadel and a confrontation of High Civilization",<sup>21</sup> or Ilya Kabakov's 1988 installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*).

Often these same strategies have been also interpreted in the context of politically engaged art, with a tendency to social and political change. Utopia and political change are explicitly understood as a unitary entity by the situationists Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers in their unique manifesto *Culture and Revolutionary Politics* (1960), which sees the meaning of utopian practices exclusively in connection with a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist order.<sup>22</sup> The romantic revolutionary perception of art as proposed by Beuys's concept of social organism as a work of art whose major goal is a transformation of social, economic, legal, and cultural forms represented a similar referential model for artists.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of the 1990's, utopian

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<sup>21</sup> Denes, A. (1982). *Wheatfield: A Confrontation. Two Acres of Wheat Planted and Harvested. Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan*, artist's statement, New York. Retrieved from: <<http://pruned.blogspot.si/2005/10/wheatfield-by-agnes-denes-or-not.html>>

<sup>22</sup> Knabb, K. (ed.) (1981/2006). *The Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, pp. 391–393.

<sup>23</sup> Beuys, J. (1973). I am Searching for a Field Character. In: Kuoni, C. (ed.) (1990), *Energy Plan for the Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, p. 21.

visions occupied the so-called 'microtopias', opposite to utopian visions of the avant-gardes as they did not focus on the whole, global social transformation but on the "processing of the possible" within microtopias and local problems.<sup>24</sup> The phenomenon of participation as an important strategy of relational art may be seen as one of the forms of contemporary utopian engagement inside a specific community which on the micro level of the laboratory space of art creates the impression of a common goal, a political effect, and, in general, a resistance to organised passivity. The core of modern utopias is such that they do not envision one sole alternative for the future. In the light of evidence that there is no consensus about (one and unified) utopia, Duncombe as well envisaged a concept of open utopia in the construction of which anyone can participate and create a part of the utopian vision based on his or her own imagination.

While the main part of discussion on utopia and the utopian in art is dedicated to the critical side of utopias and the political dimensions of the utopian, the present discussion focuses on strategies that create spaces through art form in which utopian imagination, not programmatically or actually "motivated" but as a metaphor for the principle of utopia, is actualised. We speak of *images* as the embodiment of utopian imagination, in which typical notions of utopia are linked on trans-historical and trans-temporal levels: aspiration, imagination, and the possibility of transformation. Such utopian potential will be substantiated along with the projects by James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, and Antony Gormley.

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<sup>24</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud assesses that today's utopian heritage points towards two main streams: the neighbourhood and the ephemera. As he claims in *Relational Aesthetics*, art today no longer seeks to represent utopias universal in scope, but its role is to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing world. In: Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses du réel, pp. 5, 21.

The utopian in these cases is actually conceived through understanding the phenomenological space, building a mental space for utopian projection. These spaces are conceptualised differently from classic utopian projects and contemporary micro-utopian strategies as they do not suggest alternative forms of being or a concrete impact on and materialisation of utopian visions respectively, deriving from discomfort in a particular social and political situation. Here, the utopian field is conceived on an abstract level through which the utopian becomes present or imaginable as an open possibility.

Utopia is not imagined as an external, transcendental sphere with no practically imaginable place (leaving aside the religious images of paradise), which—pending the miraculous—we might aspire in the utmost point of cognition. The utopian perspective does not derive from the imaginary exterior but from the concrete present. Examples of art to be considered as bearing the function of the utopian are not so much utopian representations as they are *pre-images*, enabling the occupation of utopia. In this regard, they are starting points for envisioning utopia: they have no programming effect and no plan of collective social transformation; on the contrary, they function as incubators for establishing utopian thought. Here, the utopian vision does not relate to the collective changing of the societal body but assumes that the collective transformation can only transact from the individual outwards and result from the configuration of multitudes and differences with a common denominator in producing "collective" feelings and experiences that are (on the level of a work of art at its best) sensed both individually and universally (e.g. hope, freedom, happiness, death, etc.). The individual envisions the world and pronounces upon it from his own perspective, therefore the utopian in this sense can be imagined in a space of personal experience. In this space

of utopian imagination there is no place for pre-"designed demos"<sup>25</sup> and an optimal social project that suits all, since freedom, as (fairly non-utopian) stated by Emil Cioran,<sup>26</sup> can only be conceived for ourselves. With this assumption, the works of art focus on the constitution of the subject that is able to imagine alterity based on a concrete experiential situation and multi-sensory engagement in a customised space of art—not only from the point of social, economic, political, and ideological but also phenomenological anchoring. It is not about a retreat from reality in the sense of romantic escapism or about resorting to the inner world because of being incapable of accepting societal facts, it is about drawing attention to the own thinking and sensing of existence based on focused sensorial construction of our relation to the world, which is not only an individual relationship but also a generic one. The utopian moment derives from this very fine-tuned focus that can cause shifts in feeling and thinking and thus interfere with the routine-like and instrumentalised perception. The imagination to search for something new can only come from this kind of interruption and change.

James Turrell is known for his light works in which the common perception of space, defined by orientation and the relationship between bodies and objects, is converted. His spaces are conceived as light volumes that cannot be determined with any borders, margins, depth, or width, which gives the viewer a feeling of complete lostness in space and time. Time in these works is opposite to the contemporary sense of time<sup>27</sup> based on speed and dynamic

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<sup>25</sup> As Duncombe writes: "Utopians too often consider people as organic material to be shaped, not as wilful agents who do the shaping; the role of the populace is, at best, to conform to a plan of a world already delivered complete. [...]. In Utopia, the *demos* is designed, not consulted." Duncombe, S. (2012). *Open Utopia*, [op. cit.] pp. xii–xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Cioran, E. (1998). *History and Utopia* [1960] Richard Howard (trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>27</sup> According to Jonathan Crary "non-stop life-world of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism" is characterised by incessant activity, "duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning, against which the fragility of human life as well as rotation of earth are increasingly irrelevant (inadequate). In an environment (indifferent to

exchange of work and place. Time and space are perceived as independent categories, far more extensive than local alternations; the viewer reflects his position inside those ambiances as a component of a much larger space than the one he currently occupies.

Turrell joined the research programme *Art & Technology* of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1969 where, together with his colleagues,<sup>28</sup> he researched human perception in spaces of sensory deprivation and isolation. The *Ganzfeld* project, where the viewer is in a closed light-emanating chamber, became an important starting point for his later researches in art, especially in his light ambiances that enable the viewer to physically enter the light spaces.

*Ganzfeld* creates a field of vision offering nothing tangible for the eye, while a static point and a very limited space produce a feeling of infinite volume. The sensory deprivation from everyday noises and external stimuli enables total absorption of the senses and focus on one single phenomenon—on the current perception which turns from the exterior light phenomenon to the sphere of the virtual. This borderline perceptive experience causes an ambivalent perception of space. As a consequence of highly sharpened senses, which in a coordinate free space have no direction, no focus, and no common orientational organisation, the space seems domestic on one side but foreign and unnatural on the other. Suddenly that what is in front of us and close becomes perceptively unavailable and unfamiliar. It seems as if we are entering a field of constituting our own perception which in day-to-day

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natural rhythm), in which natural rhythm is denied, humans have to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems, and life is completely aligned with models of machinic performance. In: Crary, J. (2013). *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, pp. 8–9.

<sup>28</sup> Turrell worked on this project with artist Robert Irwin and Dr Edward Wortz, a specialist in perceptual physiology and psychology.

experience is estranged, or as Turrell explains: "I wanted a visual confrontation between physical seeing and spaces that created an experience of seeing, familiar to us beyond our conscious-awake state, only we had never experienced it that way."<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, experiencing Turrell's light ambiences is comparable with dreams. In dreams, however concrete they might reappear in the mind, we cannot precisely determine the space and the time of the dreaming event and even though we are experiencing intensely, as if it is real, we will never be able to consistently reconstruct the dream, since in the dream world the perception of space and time is different from the waking state. The real space and its unconscious, imaginary transposition inseparably intertwine in dreams; at the same time, some traces of memory reinforce and material elements transform. Some of Turrell's projects are conceptualised as a reconstruction of lucid dreams in which the dreamer typically perceives dreams as a real world. During lucid dreaming, parts of our brain become active, which are usually active during the waking state and not connected to ordinary states of dreaming. In this state, the person is aware of being dreaming and can thus control the course of events during dreaming. In dreams as well as in daydreams, rules and norms do not apply anymore, there is total freedom and everything is possible; one can imagine and realise one's visions and a world according to one's own needs. The space of dreams can therefore be a springboard for utopia that imagines a transformation of social frames and a subversion of internalised rules and rituals. The dangerous power of dreams is also discussed within the internalised dread at the thought of dreaming in the anti-utopian world of Zamyatin's *One State*. Here, dreams are a "serious

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<sup>29</sup> Turrell, J. (1993). *Air Mass*. London: The South Bank Centre, p. 19.

psychic disease"<sup>30</sup> that jeopardises the mathematical balance in the operation of the rational societal machine.

Turrell's utopian dimension comes from the relation between the substantiality of the experience and the virtuality of the *image*, between the phenomenological fact and the imaginative, the fictional that produces it. Here, the material space is the one creating the virtual space of utopia, into which we project ourselves. Turrell's light volumes are places without a place—defined by depth which is not described by metrical units but by shifting between the material and the imaginative, the real and the virtual, whereas looking is analogue to the travelling of the self through different states of consciousness. The unpredictability of the depth and the inability of defining its dimensions create a space of anticipation. The visitor is placed in an area which by its "open" volume can produce a symbolic analogy of the utopian space and its open possibilities. The artist described the work *Meeting* (1986)<sup>31</sup> from the *Skyscapes* series as an encounter of two spaces: a space where the visitor is located and a space in close contact with the sky, thus two separate and distant spaces that closely interact in the artwork. The fragmentary sections from the *Skyscapes* series optically draw the sky down towards the floor, just above the viewer, where it no longer functions as a sky, defined by the horizons the utmost point of view in relation to the Earth, but as an infinite space of abstract blue, into which the notion of

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<sup>30</sup> "Clearly I must be ill. I have never dreamed before. They say that with the ancients dreaming was a perfectly ordinary, normal occurrence. [...] We, however, know that dreams are a serious psychic disease. And I know that until this moment my brain has been a chronometrically exact gleaming mechanism without a single speck of dust. But now...". In: Zamyatin, Y. (1972). *We* [1924]. Mirra Ginsburg (trans.). New York: Avon Books, p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> The permanent light installation from 1986 at MoMA PS1 consists of a square room with a rectangular aperture for an unobstructed view of the sky. The carefully modulated lighting programme casts stark yellow tones on the white walls and gradually contrasts the sky in transition. In a specially designed ambience for enhancing perceptive attentiveness, the visitor can observe light alternations throughout the day to the setting of the sun.

incomprehensible distance and magnitude is projected. In such way we can imagine the sky Baudelaire described as making one dream of eternity.<sup>32</sup> However, the impression of spatial and temporal infinity implicated by the light apertures is placed into perceptive availability and haptic presence in Turrell's work. Here is the distant, the not (yet) achieved already on the horizon of the tangible and set out by the coordinates of our bodies.

Turrell's spaces are concrete realms of our senses, perceptions, movements, and contemplations, and yet they appear unreal and delusional as they elude any kind of tangibility. The codes of perceptive orientation the works are based on no longer have an impact on them. We are placed into the basic lack of our physique; however, due to this lack we can reassemble our own position and again feel solid ground underneath our feet. In describing the antagonism of this situation, let us recall the last sequence from the film *Gravity*, which shows the feeling of helplessness in controlling the own body, after it experienced a transformation in the weightless space. The sequence portrays how the lead character happily returns from space to the Earth, but as she tries to get up, she is not able to walk: the most natural operation becomes an unfamiliar and tedious task. However, in touching the firmness of the sand, which in the effort of finding balance runs through her hands, and in the mud that softens underneath her feet, the physiological memory rehabilitates and the assurance of existence returns as a foundation of the physical experience, which through suspended gravity indeed has undergone transformation but remains the biological and material reality of our bodies.

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<sup>32</sup> "And the skies that make one dream of eternity". In: Baudelaire, C. (2008). *Les Fleurs du Mal* [1857]/*The Flowers of Evil*. Fragment from the poem *Landscape* from the cycle *Parisian Scenes*, French-English edition, Creative Commons 2008, p. 318. Retrieved from: <<https://justcheckingonall.wordpress.com/2008/09/17/ baudelaire-les-fleurs-du-mal-pdf/>>

Gravity is only one of the realities, but for us, it is a place based on which we define and imagine other places. We cannot yet occupy spacelessness and, perhaps, this is the adequate spatial metaphor for utopia, which exists as a concept but is (yet) unachievable as a space of existence. The utopian impulse has rebound effect, since its projection returns to the initial point from which it is envisioned and conceived. Turrell's works, inter alia, also refer to the way of showing the phenomenological dimension of perception anchored in the boundaries of our senses. The near and the far are here projected from the same point. Therefore, in these spaces we can recognise the *images* of utopian consciousness as defined by Ernst Bloch: "Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment [...]. We need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness."<sup>33</sup>

An environment in which the nearest closeness—on the phenomenological level—is perceived as an undefined depth has also been created in the light installation *Your Blind Passenger* (2010) by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. On the way through approximately 90-metre-long tunnel, environments coloured by different types of light (from bright daylight, cold blue, golden sunset orange to deep darkness) follow each other in order to reconstruct light, alternating during the day, in an isolated art space. The visual and sensory experience is completely redefined in this installation, as it demands from the viewer full attention to and diligent monitoring of changes in relation to perception and light that we would otherwise miss in the everyday context. Entering the tunnel, the visitor is surrounded by thick fog, which provides visibility at only 1.5 metres.

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<sup>33</sup> Bloch, E. (1986). *The Principle of Hope*. [op. cit.], p. 14.

Similarly to Turrell, the feeling of space as a place of concrete and measurable dimension disintegrates and time becomes irrelevant. Despite the fact that the visitor walks through the environment with open eyes, he has the impression of walking with closed eyes, since sight is of no help in his orientation in space. The effect of accumulated light is paradoxical, as full visibility is turned to its opposite—dazzle from light which prevents seeing. With "blindlooking", Eliasson thematises Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological problem of the invisible coming from the visible and the visible disappearing in the invisible as the process of mutual interaction is realised in the installation. Moving through the environment of the installation is unpredictable, visitors do not know what to expect in front of them, the sense of balance is disappearing because of the absence of factual coordinates. Due to the foggy scattered light, it is impossible to see one's own body: the outstretched arm suddenly seems as an apparition, the body is not felt as a coherent whole but as a sensorially dismantled yet intensively functioning device. The fogbound visibility empowers other senses, especially the hearing, which helps evaluate spatial information and one's positioning in relation to other visitors. The intensely experienced present is a characteristic feature of all Eliasson's works. The participant is placed in an unpredictable situation whose only reality is the reflection of one's own perception of perceiving—experiencing the momentary presence, its changing feelings and conditions. Eliasson leads the visitor to the utmost efficiency of sensory potential, or, like Madeleine Grynsztejn suggests, Eliasson with his works encourages "a critical attitude toward normative processes of perception while at the same time offering viewers opportunities to expand their ability to envision."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Grynsztejn, M. (2007). (Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson. In Grynsztejn, M. et al. (ed.). *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*. San Francisco: Museum of Modern Art, p. 17.

With Eliasson, there is also an element of utopian projection, in which space is considered an open category for manifesting the possible but always conceived by the here and now of the physical experience. In the space of the installation *Your Blind Passenger*, the visitor is embedded in the process of changeability. Eliasson believes that utopia emerges from the presence and "is linked to the now, the moment between one second and the next". As he explains, "Utopia constitutes a possibility that is actualized and converted into reality, an opening where concepts like subject and object, inside and outside, proximity and distance are tossed into the air and redefined. Our sense of orientation is challenged and the coordinates of our spaces, collective and personal, have to be renegotiated. Changeability and mobility are at the core of utopia."<sup>35</sup> The place of the installation *Your Blind Passenger* may be defined by the body and a physical environment, but it is, similar as with Turrell, designed to stay imaginatively open and unpredictable as a field of experience. The concreteness of perception produced by the exposure of the body to reduced and de-contextualised stimuli redirects the attention to sensory experience and thus enables experiential transformation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed a conception of space, which can also be applied to Eliasson's construction of spatial experience. As Merleau-Ponty observes, "space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the *means*<sup>36</sup> whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected."<sup>37</sup> In the space of Eliasson's installation, the obscurity of the event is a means

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<sup>35</sup> Retrieved from: <<http://www.gwarlingo.com/2011/olafur-eliasson-your-blind-passenger/>>

<sup>36</sup> Emphasised by the author.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945]. London-New York: Routledge, p. 284.

that encourages the articulation of consciousness and triggers a mental projection with which we occupy the arena of absent conceptions. The interaction of sensory and cognitive elements in the perception of space causes the exterior (in this case the art installation) to turn to the interior of the mental space and its conceptions.

While Eliasson and Turrell construct phenomenological environments as potential arenas of utopian vision, the works by British sculptor Antony Gormley address the possibility of transformation taking place in images of the human being. The portrayal of lonely and motionless human figures, usually gazing into the distance, as if they would halt in contemplating the present, is characteristic for Gormley's work. The artist often places his figures in natural ambiances, in front of a vast sea or wide landscape panoramas (e.g. in works like *Land, Sea, and Air II* [1982] or *Post* [1993]) to where their imaginative gaze extends. Gormley explains that in his works he tries to negotiate a relationship between the body as a thing and the body as a place, while the image of the body always includes a space "that can't be occupied physically but can be occupied imaginatively"<sup>38</sup> and where the world, caught in the mould of the body, extends beyond the proportions of its frame.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the viewer, while observing his figures, always has the feeling that their reflective, meditating states project from the inside to the outside world and occupy it with the vision of their own future. It must not be overlooked that the eyes of these figures are often closed or shrouded and thus rather turned inwards than outwards. The expectation emanating from

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<sup>38</sup> Gormley, A. (1994). An Interview Between Antony Gormley and Marjetica Potrč. *Antony Gormley: Field for the British Isles*. Llandudno: Oriol Mostyn, p. 59.

<sup>39</sup> This is illuminated by a particular repeated sensation before sleep the artist experienced as a child: "[...] the space behind my eyes was incredibly tight, a tiny, dark matchbox, suffocating in its claustrophobic imprisonment. And slowly the space would expand and expand until it was enormous. In a way I feel that experience is still the basis of my work." Gormley, A. (1997). E. H. Gombrich in Conversation with Antony Gormley. *Antony Gormley*. London: Phaidon, p. 10.

these figures on the one hand, and the absorption of the momentary or the impression of being indrawn on the other, in these statures derive from the same point of view.

Gormley's works, similarly like Turrell's and Eliasson's, activate the viewer's participation by pushing him into an isolated space of personal responses and senses where perception and reflection on an otherwise daily experience become intensified. His sculptures include the viewer emotionally on the level of recognising his own vulnerability and fragility, striving for a new coexistence between the individual and the world, achievable through the return to basic humanistic values. Gormley's works create a specific and latent relationship between the individual and the crowd, a relationship constituent of every utopian "programme" that envisages implementation through the ideal balance between the interest of the individual and the interest of the community. In spite of the fact that the sculptures carry traces of subjective experience, literally being impressions cast from the artist's own body, they are exonerated from any portrait features and redesigned in order to perceive them as types, anonymous individuals, "standard bodies",<sup>40</sup> as described by E. H. Gombrich. This standardised body represents what Gormley calls "a collective subjective",<sup>41</sup> enabling a transfer between the distinctly subjective and the universal (collective) experience. As he says himself, his works carry the potential to transfer their subjective experience to the viewer, acting equally intense. The series of terracotta works entitled *Field* and created for different locations thematises transfer and interaction between the individual and the crowd. On the one hand, the project was conceived as a collaborative action in which the artist asked the participants to make figures and encouraged them to treat the clay as an extension of their own bodies.<sup>42</sup> On

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the other hand, *Field* is conceptualised as a landscape of bodies in which the voice of the individual reverberates in hundreds of figures and is simultaneously collectively centralised in him or her. Richard Noble interpreted *Field* as a "work which gives form to the possible future in which equality of contribution is respected and space is given for collective self-awareness, which neither subsumes nor destroys individual identity".<sup>43</sup> Collectively, on a symbolic level the individual sphere expands to the outside, to the collective space which in the sight of the viewer reflects a metaphor of the inside. The collective challenges the potential of humanity's transformative power that begins in the individual and is realised in collaboration.

In the sculpture series *A Case for an Angel* the spread arms of Gormley's sculptures are transformed into aeroplane wings, thus alluding to and enhancing the symbolic human desire to fly skywards. The Angel is a celestial resident, a mediator between the terrestrial and the heavenly, between one and the other level of existence, which in Gormley's work occupies the human body designed as an "uncomfortable mixture between aeronautics and anatomy".<sup>44</sup>

The human and technological body implies a suggestion of the liberating power of technology which in the present is one of the central references of utopian imagination. In this sense, it is vital to mention an important reference, Klee's drawing named *Angelus Novus*, whose owner Walter Benjamin described it as follows:

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<sup>43</sup> Noble, R. (2003). An Anthropoetics of Space: Antony Gormley's *Field*. *Antony Gormley, Asian Field*. London: The British Council, pp. 199–201.

<sup>44</sup> Gormley, A. (1997). E. H. Gombrich in Conversation with Antony Gormley, [*op. cit.*], p. 25.

[The painting] shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the effect of this progress, reaching its peak in the modern society of global capitalism, is mirrored in the prevailing melancholic expressions of Gormley's figures. Neither is their back turned to the future nor is their vision building the future on the wreckage of the past but derives from its present position: the figures stare in front of them the same way as they stare into themselves, while asking themselves about the meaning of existence and the uncertainty of what follows. Their position is ambiguous, similar to the mysterious and indefinable "machine angel" by Klee, in which Adorno has recognised an ambiguous image, announcing either the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it.<sup>46</sup> Then again, Gormley's angel optimistically spreads his wings to fly but is simultaneously motionless and

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, W. (1968). *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In Arendt, H. (ed.). *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace&World, pp. 257–258.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, T. W. (1980). *Commitment [1962]. Aesthetics and Politics. Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno* (afterword by Fredric Jameson). London: Verso, pp. 194–195.

numb under the weight he carries.<sup>47</sup> It seems as if his stature announces a paralysed utopian impulse determined by a conflict between the terms given by our existence and the idea about how to improve and exceed them. The angel is a parable of yearning for the future, for the potentials of a different existence in which physical being and spiritual vision are aligned—but this is only possible through resolving the dilemmas of the present.

Utopia is a way of thinking about the future, determined by coordinates of the present, of the empirical, social, and phenomenological body. Phenomenologically, the body is of central meaning in the perception of and the reaction to the surrounding world. The physical body informs the human subjectivity, or as expressed by Olafur Elisson, senses are experiential guides, by which we receive, evaluate and produce reality and only through sensorium—feelings, memories, convictions, values, thoughts, uncertainties—we get in relation to the collective.<sup>48</sup> The suggested art projects included in the context of the utopian are based on the sensibilisation of the individual who can transfer himself to the collective level—the attitude and behaviour of the people—only through personal transformation. In times of technological hegemony and late capitalism, which in terms of its structure does not allow exteriority, the focus on the here and now obstructs our view and that makes us unable to picture or incorporate our fragmentary existence into a broader scheme. Also the need for a vision of an alternative world has faded in this regard, while the imagination in which a different reality could be envisioned is benumbed. It is not about lacking something, neither about

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<sup>47</sup> Gormley explains that *A Case for an Angel* is a *declaration of inspiration and imagination* [...] but "on the other hand it is also an image of somebody who is fatally handicapped, who cannot pass through any door and is desperately burdened [...]." Gormley, A. (1993). Interview with Declan McGonagle. *Antony Gormley*. London: Tate Gallery Publications, p. 136.

<sup>48</sup> Eliasson, O. (2013). Interlude: Your Gravitational Now. In Featherstone, D. and Painter, J. (eds.). *Spatial Politics: Essays For Doreen Massey*, Oxford: Wiley and Blackwell.

how to define the lack; it is about how to overcome it. In the discussed works of art, utopian imagination resides in experiential situations that suggest a reconstruction of our physical, emotional, and spiritual presence, only through which it is possible to invent new alternatives of life. The presented cases do not relate to a concrete utopian project but to the principle of utopian thought and the impulses that produce it. It is quite imaginable that today's utopian vision, paradoxically, draws from the rehabilitation of what has been pushed to the margins of reflection and consciousness and from there outlines the alternatives of the future.