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Kinetic Sculpture Comes Full Circle

"Ventilator," Olafur Eliasson's hypnotic kinetic sculpture, Returns to MoMA

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

"Ventilator," Olafur Eliasson's hypnotic kinetic sculpture, is making its second appearance at the Museum of Modern Art after having its debut in the artist's 2008 exhibition. But its few elemental parts—an electrical cord, a mechanical fan and a suggestive expanse of air—warrant more than a second glance, according to Mr. Eliasson.

"I think that 'Ventilator' is captivating to look at, but you also start to wonder what on Earth makes it fly," he said of the piece, which hangs from the ceiling and propels itself in circles around the room. "When we walk into a space, we tend to look at the walls and the floor as solids, and everything between as somehow not there. We know very well that air is thick enough for a jumbo jet to take off and float on it. There is something there, conceptually, to solidify."

The materials for the spartan sculpture, then, work hard to make for more than a mere basic display. "Of course it's supposed to look like I just went down to the hardware store and bought a \$20 fan," Mr. Eliasson said, "but the truth is, as it often is with ideas that look simple, a lot of work went into making it."

He tested numerous fans for "weight and robustness," and it was no simple feat to find a 50-foot cable immune to coiling up.

The premise of "Ventilator" aligns with aspects of much of the 46-year-old Mr. Eliasson's work, which plays with light, space and matter in different states of being. One such substance was a grouping of glacial-ice chunks that he exhibited over the summer at MoMA PS1, as part of the climate-change-inspired survey "Expo 1." Some critics balked at the energy required to transport pieces of a glacier, from Iceland, and then display them in freezing conditions. But Mr. Eliasson,

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Matthew Septimus

Olafur Eliasson, whose 'Ventilator' installation will be on view at MoMA

who was born in Iceland and now lives in Berlin and Copenhagen, called the work an urgent plea.

"I embrace the people who criticize me for that. They have a good point," he said. "But if you go two blocks from PS1, there's a deli which has seven refrigerators filled with Gatorade."

"Ventilator," too, comes with a suggestion of climate change, a new aspect to a work first conceived in 1997. "Think about what our relationship with the weather was like 15 years ago," the artist said. "An old piece can take on new meaning as time goes."

It also aspires to ground the viewer, more personally, in a contemplative sense of self. "There is a strong wonderment and magic in how poetic

this piece is in relation to the simplicity of its setup," said Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 and chief curator at large of MoMA. "The moves are sometimes quiet and calming like a pendulum, sometimes capricious like a living being."

Mr. Eliasson expressed affection for the ways that currents around "Ventilator" can change. "In museums and public buildings, these grand-scale architectural statements, sometimes it can be hard to find your own body," he said. "To have a fan hanging—a very unmythical fan—makes space tangible. It addresses what we take for granted, what we don't think of as being there. The idea is to make the negative space a positive space."

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