

**RE-CREATING THE SUBLIME EXPERIENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF  
CONTEMPORARY ART USING POSTMODERN IDEAS  
OF THE SUBLIME**

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By

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HAVE APPROVED THIS THESIS

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## Abstract

The sublime has been noted as an outmoded concept, particularly in relation to contemporary art theory. Yet discourses around the sublime still exist today and are mediated by museums, galleries, curators, and philosophers who critique art that seek to emulate the psychological experience. The sublime is still a recognizable experience in current society, yet it is not attributed as such. It is therefore dispossessed of its meaningful and essential associations about the state of human condition, life and existence. Thus, the central questions of this research are how is the sublime articulated in contemporary visual art and how does it reflect the values of contemporary culture and society? To answer these questions, I am using theories by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde* and in Tsang Lap-Chuen's *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory* in analyzing my artifacts. I am investigating works by contemporary artists, namely Matthew Albanese's *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides*, Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, and Mariele Neudecker's *Over and Over, Again and Again*. In addition, I will be utilizing the seminal eighteenth-century treatises on the sublime namely, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* with the postmodern interpretations by Lyotard and Tsang. My argument is that the concept of the sublime is still relevant in the contemporary period, and has been articulated more prominently through sophisticated, complex, experiential art that reflect society's need for transcendence and the sublime experience.

**Keywords:** Sublime, nature, contemporary art, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Jean-François Lyotard, Tsang Lap-Chuen, Matthew Albanese, Olafur Eliasson, Mariele Neudecker

## List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Matthew Albanese, *Wildfire*, 2016. Copyright by Matthew Albanese, reproduced with permission of the artist.

Figure 2. Matthew Albanese, *Fighting Tides*, 2016. Copyright by Matthew Albanese, reproduced with permission of the artist.

Figure 3. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003, in OlafurEliasson.net. Reproduced under fair educational use policy, <https://www.copyrightuser.org/understand/exceptions/education/>.

Figure 4. Mariele Neudecker, *Over and Over, Again and Again*, 2004, in MarieleNeudecker.co.uk. Reproduced under fair educational use policy, <https://www.copyrightuser.org/understand/exceptions/education/>.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their love and encouragement in my decision to pursue graduate studies in the United States.

*Maraming salamat sa inyong lahat* (thank you all very much).

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mom Adelaida, and to my dad, Francis (†) who has moved beyond the threshold on 19 October 2019.

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*ad majorem Dei gloriam*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Overview

The sublime is a philosophical concept that is understood as that which conveys the unknowable, numinous, or boundless and incites feelings of pleasure in awe, and pain in terror. It is a concept that has been defined in a myriad of ways across different fields over the last three centuries. The concept is more commonly associated with an overwhelming apprehension beyond the self, usually enriched by the experience of nature. As an aesthetic category, however, the sublime has been noted as irrelevant in contemporary art and has been mostly attributed to the romantic period. Yet its notions have only been transformed in contemporary times as the use and reception of the concept has developed through the centuries and is thus applied differently in present society. As John Mullan aptly says:

But if we can rescue its older, deeper meanings, "the sublime" catches an experience that we still recognise in a post-modern world, glimpsed in the dizzying reaches of interplanetary space or the vertiginous spirals of the human genome.<sup>1</sup>

The sublime is, indeed, a recognizable experience in current society and mediated by different objects. In our postmodern world, there is still the unspoken need, hunger, or desire for the experience of the sublime, and it is still striven for in present society. People tend to wait in line and pay to see the latest spectacle that mimics the experience, or to visit the tallest building in the world, travel to witness a natural phenomenon occurring such as melting icebergs, or to watch the Niagara Falls, or to witness a volcanic eruption from afar. Although people still search or aspire for the sublime experience, it is not attributed as such and society elevates the feelings

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<sup>1</sup> John Mullan, "A Terrible Beauty," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2000, accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/aug/19/scienceandnature>.

or emotions without fully acknowledging the phenomenon as a spiritual and sublime experience.

As Tsang Lap Chuen says:

If the sublime refers to what lies beyond the human, and if we are no longer under the illusion of the possibility of transcendence to the beyond, we might well treat the sublime as a moribund aesthetic. [...] While the sublime of the Kantian kind has been in decline, whatever is sublime appears also to be in decline, at least in the world of philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

The sublime is therefore dispossessed of its meaningful and essential references about the state of human condition, life, and existence. Thus, my research will demonstrate how the concept of the sublime can be applied to contemporary art and emphasize the enduring relevance of the term in understanding the ad-hoc responses to artificial objects in contemporary culture. It is an important concept to recognize as the experience of it still applies—not only in the experiencing of natural phenomena—but also in experiencing postmodern art that depicts nature. The central questions for this research are the following: how is the sublime articulated in contemporary visual art and how does it reflect the values of culture and society? To answer these questions, I will examine theoretical works on the subject such as Jean-François Lyotard's *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde* and Tsang Lap-Chuen's *The Sublime: Groundwork Towards a Theory*, along with the eighteenth-century treatises: Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's *The Critique of Judgement*. The objectives of my research are to analyze artworks by contemporary visual artists who use and recreate nature as subject in their practice and to find their placement within modern and contemporary theories of the sublime. By responding to these questions, I will exhibit how contemporary art can be successful in construing the sublime experience in a viewer and

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<sup>2</sup> Lap Chuen Tsang, *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1998), 8.

establish how the sublime as an aesthetic category still exists in contemporary society between the gap of nature and technology. These questions will be addressed by referring to the historical notions of Burke and Kant but also by adapting postmodern sentiments of contemporary theorists.

To analyze the concept of the sublime in the contemporary period, I have chosen artworks by artists who create three-dimensional work: Matthew Albanese, Olafur Eliasson and Mariele Neudecker. These artists seek to emulate nature to provide a unique experience to the viewer without purposefully alluding their works to the sublime.

The first artist is Matthew Albanese, whose three-dimensional miniature works are translated into photography. Albanese creates dioramas that explore natural phenomena with special effects. His works recreate depictions of miniature worlds, storms, the cosmos and even paintings such as *The Oxbow* by transcendentalist artist Thomas Cole. He photographs his works to produce depictions of picturesque, terrifying or mesmerizing imaginary lands and scenarios such as lava flow, thunderstorm or wildfire. The photographs of his works allude to nineteenth-century paintings that seem to convey the sublime experience. His work *Wildfire* has a similar depth and feel as to the disaster paintings of the past, particularly the *Eruption of Vesuvius* by Pierre-Jacques Volaire in 1767. His other work *Fighting Tides* also provides the same intensity as J.M.W. Turner's *Waves Breaking against the Wind*.

The second artist whose work I will explore is Olafur Eliasson, a Danish environmental artist who uses basic elements of the weather such as light, water, temperature, and pressure for his installation art.<sup>3</sup> Most of his works replicate appearances of nature, such as the moon, a water

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<sup>3</sup>“The Artist,” Tate, accessed February 18, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project-0-1>.

geyser, rainbow or even the sun. By representing the effects of natural phenomena, Eliasson is encouraging viewers to “reflect upon their understanding and perception of the physical world that surrounds them.”<sup>4</sup> *The Weather Project* was created at the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London in 2003. The exhibition was a site-specific installation meant to transmit an illusion of the sun. A giant, yellow circle against red sky, visitors were awestruck in reverential amazement by the spectacle. The sun was created with a semi-circular screen backlit by two hundred mono-frequency lights, artificial mist, aluminum frames with foil, and a ceiling full of mirrors. Although the fake sun did not generate heat, it created a natural effect with haze machines that generated mist. The installation art represented a spectacular indoor sunset in which visitors could see their own reflections on the ceiling above. In addition, visitors could walk at the far end of the hall and see how the “sun” was constructed.

The final artist whose work I will explore is Mariele Neudecker, a German artist who creates underwater, forest and mountain landscapes inside glass tanks filled with water, dye and other chemical solutions to mimic nature and create atmospheric, misty conditions. Her works invite quiet contemplation and meditation to viewers and provide an armchair experience of nature itself. Neudecker is interested in exploring notions of the contemporary sublime to reproduce a heightened experience of the landscape and address the “subjective and mediated conditions of any first-hand encounter.”<sup>5</sup> In her work *Over and Over, Again and Again*, despite taking inspiration from Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s *The Gate in the Rocks*, Neudecker gives an opportunity to viewers by providing a glimpse of what people must have felt during Caspar

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<sup>4</sup> Tate, “The Artist.”

<sup>5</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Mariele Neudecker,” Homepage, accessed December 4, 2018, <https://www.marieleneudecker.co.uk/>.

David Friedrich's time when viewing the cliffs in the island of Rügen in Germany, such as what he painted in *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*.

Contemporary environmental art prompts viewers to reflect on their relationship as human beings with the natural world. But art that emulates nature also confronts human faculties about the limits of perception and the unrepresentable. Thus, art becomes a vehicle for philosophical contemplation and spiritual transcendence. By analyzing the works of these artists, I am demonstrating how visual images through memory, recognition, imagination and emotions can be evoked in a viewer through contemporary art installations that depict nature, thereby resulting in a sublime experience. My analysis will regard the seminal romantic ideas of the sublime, along with postmodern theories such as Tsang Lap Tsuen's framework on the experience, and Jean Francois Lyotard's postmodern interpretation of the sublime as it applies to art. In choosing this topic, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of how the sublime applies in our current society and how it reflects contemporary culture's need for transcendence or the sublime experience.

## **Literature Review**

The sublime is a concept that was first advanced in ancient philosophy by Longinus and in the eighteenth century was further developed by Irish philosopher Edmund Burke and German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The basic notion of the sublime as awe-inspiring, overwhelming, shocking, terrifying, mysterious and wonderful was popularized by Edmund Burke in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1756. Burke consolidated ancient discourse on the sublime and proposed a more unified idea or theory. In it he writes:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>6</sup>

Burke thus places the phenomenon of the sublime as intrinsic to the natural event or forces of nature. He further classifies the sublime source into several categories such as “obscurity,” “power,” “privation,” “vastness,” “infinity,” “magnitude,” “magnificence,” “suddenness,” “intermitting,” “feeling and pain,” among many others. Burke’s catalogue of the sources of sublime became part of the common knowledge, language, and reference for the sublime in nature. In addition, Burke emphasizes self-preservation as an essential condition of the sublime experience. Other than the marvelous and powerful, this enables Burke to recognize and consider other objects as sources of the sublime, including the uncanny and terrifying. As he says:

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.<sup>7</sup>

The sublime experience for Burke offers an emotional or spiritual response which still provides distance and an assurance of safety to viewers. He further highlights how these responses or “passions” provide an element of pleasure which he prefers to call as “delight,” which is an experience that belongs to self-preservation:

The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure,

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33-34.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call sublime. The passions belonging to self-preservation are the strongest of all the passions.<sup>8</sup>

Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*, however, says that the sublime is in the personal experience of the viewer encountering the natural phenomenon. The experience of the sublime is the logical or emotional response to a subject that requires contemplation. Kant famously ruled the following:

Consequently, it is the attunement of the spirit evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of reflective judgement, and not the object, that is to be called sublime. The foregoing formulae defining the sublime may, therefore, be supplemented by yet another: *The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses.*<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the sublime isn't intrinsic in the landscape, but it is imbued in the observer's reaction or emotional response to the artwork. His theory takes sublime subjects as moments for viewers to realize their "vocation as supersensible beings."<sup>10</sup> Kant proposes two modes of sublimity, where he distinguishes the qualities as "mathematical" and "dynamical." The mathematically sublime are those objects that appear so vast and incomparably great that it overcomes human capacity to understand and comprehend everything as a totality—such as the infinite space of the universe beyond the stars as one example. This defies the human faculty of any mental comprehension. On the other hand, the dynamically sublime are those objects that are extremely powerful that threaten and overwhelm with fear of life—defying any practical action if humans were in a position that was threatening them. An appropriate example would be a vast

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<sup>8</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81.

<sup>10</sup> Tsang, *The Sublime*, 6.

and stormy sea with white squalls, or a storm-surge caused by a hurricane, or tsunami caused by a powerful earthquake, lightning, or a huge asteroid hitting earth. But just like Burke, Kant regards intense emotions such as wonder, elation and awe as integral to the sublime experience. Burke and Kant also agree that the feeling of fear without necessarily being afraid if there is no absolute danger is an important condition to the sublime experience. However, Kant disagrees with Burke on the source. As Paul Crowther says:

Hence Kant makes the unlikely claim that it is not the vast or powerful object which is sublime, but rather the supersensible cast of mind which enables us to cope with it. The second point to note is that Kant's account is nature orientated, and he explicitly (if somewhat inconsistently) discounts the products of human artifice from figuring in experiences of the sublime.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Kant believes that there can be no constructed or artificial object that could mediate the sublime as the experience of it is evoked by natural phenomenon only. These notions of the sublime, however, have shifted throughout the centuries, particularly in contemporary times.

The past century brought a series of events and innovations that catapulted scholars to identify or label the reactionary experiences by observers. Previously noted as a dead concept, the sublime has yet again been revisited, and recent scholarship on the matter paved the way to the shifting notions of the sublime from a purely romantic concept to an ecological, industrial, technological, scientific and cognitive notion of the sublime. A number of contemporary scholars have theorized the concept offering a different perspective or expanding upon Burke's and Kant's models of the experience. To explore the contemporary notions of the sublime and to

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde, and the Postmodern: A Critique of Lyotard," *New Formations: Modernism/Masochism*, no. 7 (Spring 1989), 68.

understand what others have opined about it, I am exploring the following books and articles written by modern and postmodern scholars in approximately the last thirty years.

A critical view on the concept of the sublime is brought up by renowned art historian James Elkins in his essay “Against the Sublime.” In the essay, Elkins suggests that the concept of the sublime as a tool of interpretation must be completely abandoned except in studies of romantic paintings produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Elkins proposes three different arguments. Firstly, he proposes that the sublime is not a trans-historical category and that it does not really apply outside of particular ranges of artworks that were mostly done in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> He believes that it is a historically bounded term that cannot be applied to either art or science in general.<sup>13</sup> Elkins says that the notions of the postmodern sublime first by Lyotard and by subsequent scholars such as Gilbert-Rolfe were “primarily an outgrowth of philosophy and literature” and not on the visual arts.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, he believes that the sublime is an overused term in contemporary critical writing in an attempt to “smuggle covert religious meaning” with a secular spin.<sup>15</sup> Certain words used in reference to the sublime suggest religious meanings without being too blatant. He emphasizes that the philosophical terms or “masks” such as “the sublime,” “presence,” and “transcendence” cannot just be removed without revealing a certain religious discourse, because these words are part of the discourse itself. Referencing Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, these are the only remaining words in which certain truths that used to be

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<sup>12</sup> James Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffman and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

referred to as religious can find place in contemporary discussions.<sup>16</sup> Lastly, Elkins suggests that the postmodern sublime is a complicated and intricate concept and “useless” without extensive qualification.<sup>17</sup> In other words, expressing that something is sublime does not make it art nor does it provide an opening to further philosophical inquiry to come to an understanding.<sup>18</sup> Elkins believes that the concept is weak and has been misused, as he notes:

Poor sublime, in that case, which can only express the most atrophied and delicate emotions of distance and nostalgia, which requires a battery of arcane ideas to keep it afloat, which can only be found in the most hermetic postmodern art or the most *recherché* (old-fashioned) romantic painting. Poor sublime, which can only sing a feeble plaintive song about longing, which has nothing to say about the things that count in visual culture—especially gender, identity, and politics. [...] Poor sublime: relic of other centuries, perennially misused as an attractive way to express the power of art, kept afloat by academics interested in other people’s ideas, used ineffectually [...] as a covertly religious term, to permit academics to speak about religion while remaining appropriately secular. And finally, poor sublime, exiled from contemporary philosophy even as it suffuses so much of it.<sup>19</sup>

Moving forward, Elkins proposes a solution to abandon the use of the word completely for the sake of being practical and more particular in writing. He suggests that in writing, the focus must be on the event itself, rather than focusing on the emotion induced by an experience. This shift will avoid the use of the words such as “awe,” “wonder,” and the “sublime.” But despite Elkins’s objections, is it even possible to apply the concept of sublimity to art? Other scholars seem to disagree with Elkins and believe that the sublime in art is still valid.

Simon Morley’s book *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, is a collection of essays written by various scholars on the subject. Morley, who edited the book, believes that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>17</sup> Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” 75.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 88.

despite our increasingly globalized, electronically implemented systems of control and consumption, the notion of the sublime pursues a kind of experience that is authentic and elevates the self to transcendence, with transcendence being a higher and more exalted level of being.<sup>20</sup> But just like Elkins, he believes that discussions about the sublime in contemporary times are essentially covert ways for describing experiences that were once considered religious in a secular and religiously skeptical contemporary world.<sup>21</sup> Morley also speculates that the contemporary notion of the sublime is concerned with an immanent transcendence and a “transformative experience that is understood as occurring within the here and now.”<sup>22</sup> The sublime, he writes, is an “experience looking for context.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, in his book Morley categorizes the sublime in seven distinct areas: the unrepresentable, transcendence, nature, technology, terror, the uncanny and altered states.<sup>24</sup> Based on the artifacts I have chosen for my research, I am focusing on *nature* as a category of the sublime.

Meanwhile, a counterargument to the discourse on the sublime in nature is Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe’s book, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*. Gilbert-Rolfe surmises that the sublime is no longer found in nature. The limitlessness and boundlessness previously found in nature and the experience of natural phenomena is replaced by the limitlessness and simultaneity of technology and the influence of media. In other words, sublimity is no longer located in grandiosity or the feelings evoked by the realization of humanity’s “smallness,” but in technology in the digital age. A problem to his argument, however, is that the sublime is what is beyond humanity’s reason: on the one hand, it is uncontrollable, it is frightening, and it is beyond

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Morley, *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

comprehension. On the other hand, technology is something that is humanity's achievement: it is controllable, it could be manipulated and comprehensible. As Mullan says,

For the theory men, the sublime is of human manufacture. Gilbert-Rolfe would like us to believe in a "techno-sublime". A geographical idea of limitlessness has given way to a technological one. This is a paradox, for the sublime is precisely what we cannot master, while technology is supposedly what allows us to control nature.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, humanity can be overcome by the sublime because it is beyond us, but technology is still something that humanity can manage, produce and replicate. Given Gilbert-Rolfe's sentiments, identifying technology as the sole source of the sublime experience may be misguided. Hence through my research, I am establishing how art that represents nature could also mediate the experience.

In contrast, Emily Brady in her book *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, looks at the sublime as a philosophical concept and demonstrates how it is still relevant in contemporary times particularly as an aesthetic-moral relationship with the natural world. She surmises that the sublime as an aesthetic category is relevant in today's time especially as it pertains to the natural environment. Brady relies more heavily on the Kantian notion of the sublime with the two qualities that Kant originally proposed: mathematical sublime (possessing qualities of great height or vastness), and the dynamical sublime (possessing tremendous power).<sup>26</sup> She thinks that Kant's theories provide a framework to identify cases of the sublime as an aesthetic category, and she aims to examine how the sublime is distinguished in other categories. In addition, Brady makes the connection to the Kantian sublime as she

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<sup>25</sup> Mullan, "A Terrible Beauty."

<sup>26</sup> Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117-118.

identifies the qualities and experiences of what might be characterized as a sublime experience. She argues for the central importance of the natural sublime in contemporary debates of aesthetic theory. In the field of visual art, however, Brady draws upon the eighteenth-century view that the arts “are not sublime in the original sense.”<sup>27</sup> She says that “paradigm cases” involve those qualities that are associated with power or overwhelming vastness with strong emotional reaction of either excitement, delight and a little bit of anxiety, something that could only be found in nature.<sup>28</sup> Thus for Brady, most works of art do not possess these qualities and so “they cannot be sublime in the paradigmatic sense.”<sup>29</sup> As she notes, “The point of my argument is that the original sublime *is* the sublime as it is paradigmatically understood.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Brady is against artefactual sublimity in art, in support of Kant’s framework of the “mathematical sublime” and the “dynamically sublime.” To support her argument, she proposes five reasons. First, most artworks do not possess the scale or “the qualities of size and power which characterize actual sublime experiences.”<sup>31</sup> Second, formlessness and boundlessness are essential which she finds that art “has difficulty substantiating.”<sup>32</sup> Third, the wildness and disordered qualities associated with the “dynamic sublime” is lacking in art.<sup>33</sup> Fourth, art does not provide the capacity to evoke or induce feelings of “physical vulnerability, heightened emotions, and the expanded imagination characteristic of the sublime response.”<sup>34</sup> Lastly, she believes that art struggles to provide the metaphysical aspects “of the Kantian and Romantic sublimes.”<sup>35</sup> Thus in my research, I am

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<sup>27</sup> Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 119.

<sup>28</sup> “Paradigm Case” is Brady’s term that refers to the qualities and experiences that characterize the feelings or responses related to the sublime.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

exploring if artefactual sublimity is possible, not necessarily in tangible ways of the mathematical and dynamical sublime, but through works that exhibit complexity and sophistication, and have the potential to construe and evoke the experience to the viewer through association.

The subject of the sublime has evaded an official definition without alluding to a specific eighteenth-century theorist. It is usually either the Burkean or Kantian sublime that most scholars refer to when expressing an experience or describing a phenomenon or object, and the majority of the modern and contemporary scholarships are mainly reinterpretations or readings of either of these two frameworks. For the methodology of my thesis, I intend to investigate further the original writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant and to explore the philosophical interpretations of Tsang Lap-Chuen and Jean-François Lyotard in analyzing my artifacts and their placement in contemporary times.

## **Methodology**

Museums, galleries, writers and critics mediate the reception of art. Viewers are usually offered or bombarded by information before actually seeing or experiencing an artwork. Hence, written information influences the experience, viewing or understanding of specific works of art meant for public consumption. Therefore art—and what has been written about art—constructs views of the world that reflect the values and culture of society. Art that seems to mediate the sublime may evoke extremely varied responses from viewers based on the information presented to them, or more purely through a viewer's background and culture projected into their reading. Thus, the sublime may be experienced based on how the object or phenomena in question was shaped through the discourse surrounding it, or through personal experience induced by a variety

of factors. Contrary to Elkins's arguments, the eighteenth-century notions of the sublime may actually be trans-historical, i.e. not bound to a specific period in visual art. Defining it, however, has yielded a number of interpretations and perspectives by various postmodern scholars and critics. As such, this thesis will utilize the method of discourse analysis, by focusing on the scholarly writings about the subject by authors from the romantic period (Burke and Kant) and postmodern period (Lyotard and Tsang), and applying their philosophical interpretations to the four artifacts.

Tsang builds upon Kant's transcendentalist notions of the sublime and theorizes that the sublime is concerned with limit-situations: the realization or self-awareness of the limitations of our own existence. We come to this awareness of limitation at a life-limit usually triggered or evoked by an object or phenomena that we encounter. Tsang builds a framework that explains the essential conditions of the sublime experience. His framework consists of four aspects or distinctive elements in the experience of the sublime, namely: *Construal*, *Evocation*, *Affectivity* and *Instantiation*. The first aspect, *Construal*, looks at how certain objects are construed as sublime in one idea or another. The second aspect, *Evocation*, explains the different thoughts and emotions evoked in the experience of the sublime and how this evocation constitutes the sense of the sublime in the viewer. The third aspect, *Affectivity*, explains the various affective states in relation to objects or events construed as sublime. Finally, *Instantiation* explains the conditions that a viewer generally adheres to when the subject construes or is confronted by certain objects or phenomena considered as sublime. His theory also enables us to identify objects that people experience as sublime without necessarily being recognized as such. For Tsang, sublimity is not a property of objects regarded as sublime and is therefore similar to Kant's point of view. Tsang theorizes that there is no actual, consistent attribute of objects construed as "sublime." What lies

in the limit cannot be represented. The sublime can be evolved by language but not portrayed. Therefore, just as Kant theorized, Tsang characterizes the sublime as in the heart and mind of the subject responding to the object that evokes the sublime. In other words, the experience is related to the association that the subject construes of the object or phenomenon. Due to the inherent material attributes and visual presentation of certain art, there is the possibility that these art forms construe or evoke the sublime experience, potentially triggering life-limits to the spectator or that feeling of being in the threshold of existence. Tsang's theory is therefore ideal to use in analyzing Albanese's works *Fighting Tides* and *Wildfire*.

Meanwhile, Lyotard has written a number of texts and articles on postmodernism and the sublime, particularly in his seminal works the *Postmodern Condition* and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. In the *Postmodern Condition*, the notion of the sublime for Lyotard is an aesthetic category used as a postmodern device to specify a form of moral transcendence. In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard considers the sublime in relation to historical or traumatic events in history. He speculates that the mind is unable to comprehend or deal with a sublime occurrence or "event" or the *quod* (what must occur first, unrepresentable, immaterial), and the present *quid* (material, presentable). The *quid* tries to represent the *quod*, and it is the intersection between these two concepts that create the tension wherein Lyotard's "sublime" exists. While not immersed or part of an event, a spectator could experience the sublime by watching the occurrence in horror but being unable to look away. Eventually, Lyotard moved beyond historical events and instead focused on his sentiments about the visual arts and the avant-garde, which this research will be focusing on.

In *the Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Lyotard explicates how the sublime could possibly be contained within an object of art particularly in modern or contemporary art. In this piece, he

explains how the inadequacy of images to present a concept is a negative sign of the “immense power of ideas” because art is not able to imitate nature as it creates a “world apart” in which the “monstrous and the formless have their rights because they can be sublime.”<sup>36</sup> The sublime, he notes, is an indeterminate feeling of pleasure that is mixed—and also comes from—pain. When the imagination or the “faculty of presentation” is not able to comprehend or fails to provide an appropriate representation for an idea, it gives rise to this “pain” which is “a kind of cleavage within the subject between what art can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented.”<sup>37</sup> The inadequacy of images to present induces the pleasure and pain, and this dislocation of faculties gives rise to the extreme tension which Kant calls agitation, and that which Lyotard characterizes as the “pathos of the sublime.”<sup>38</sup> This enables the viewer to have a sublime experience and reflect on the numinous. As he says whilst referring to Kant:

At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation. He cites the Jewish law banning images as an eminent example of negative presentation: optical pleasure when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of infinity.<sup>39</sup>

Lyotard thus believes that avant-garde art mediates the experience of the sublime in that it is unrepresentable and incomprehensible. He elaborates how the negative representation of ideas and what cannot be represented, such as the numinous, alludes to the sublime by conveying a void, an emptiness and the lack of figuration. He surmises that representational or figurative works are very limiting in terms of conveying what cannot be represented or articulated in art. As he says:

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2011), 590.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 590-591.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

“but if the object of art is to create intense feelings in the addressee of works, figuration by means of images is a limiting constraint on the power of emotive expression since it works by recognition.”<sup>40</sup> This ultimately leads to his theory on how avant-garde art is superior in conveying the notion of the sublime. He furthermore explains how avant-garde art, or art that is radical, unorthodox, experimental—or presents nothing—still conveys *something*: that of which is what is *unpresentable*. As he says: “the art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an unpresentable; it no longer imitates nature, but is, in Burke, the actualization of a figure potentially there in language.”<sup>41</sup> Lyotard thus argues that avant-garde art forces the viewer toward the threshold or limitations of the faculties or senses regarding the unpresentable, thereby providing a feeling that is called “sublime.” Thus, Lyotard’s theory on how the avant-garde mediates the sublime is ideal to use in relation to contemporary art, such as Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* and Neudecker’s *Over and Over, Again and Again*.

In choosing this topic for my thesis, I want to situate the sublime in a broader understanding of how the concept is manifested and mediated by different contemporary art forms and how it conveys a range of emotions, visual images and recognition in human perception.

## Chapter Overviews

In the chapter entitled *Emulating the Power of Nature and Disaster in Art*, I am exploring how the sublime experience could be evoked in viewers by artificially manufactured objects. In

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<sup>40</sup> Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 591.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 592.

*The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Morley writes that nature mainly brings contemporary art back into the eighteenth-century notions of the romantic sublime with the natural world as the main source of the sublime experience.<sup>42</sup> With this point in mind, I investigate the relevance of Burke's theory on the sublime and how it resonates in present-day society by analyzing the works of artist Matthew Albanese, entitled *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides*. I am using Tsang Lap-Chuen's framework on what constitutes the sublime experience and applying it to these two artifacts. In this chapter, I am determining how the Burkean sublime could be located in contemporary art and how these artifacts trigger visual memory and recognition of traumatic events and life-limit situations in a viewer.

In the following chapter entitled *Re-Creating the Sublime Experience through Artificiality*, I am examining how objects could trigger the supersensible cast of mind toward the sublime using art that depicts nature—as the source of the sublime experience. In Tsang Lap-Chuen's book *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory*, he says that “In the secularized world of today, the sublimities of Nature, God, and Morality are no longer commonplace.”<sup>43</sup> Nature among other matters no longer seems to be a source of sublime, spiritual encounters. In this chapter, I am proposing that the sublime could still be construed or evoked in art that *imitates* nature through reproduction and artificiality, using Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* and Mariele Neudecker's *Over and Over, Again and Again* as case studies. I demonstrate how these works are appropriate examples for how sophistication and complexity in art can manifest the Kantian sublime, and support Lyotard's argument about sublimity in the avant-garde or the negative representation of the unrepresentable.

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<sup>42</sup> Simon Morley, *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>43</sup> Tsang, *The Sublime*, 7.

In conclusion, artists have attempted to create a unique experience to viewers through art that evoke the sublime phenomena whether intentionally or unintentionally. This thesis will ruminate on how the experience of the sublime has shifted from first-hand encounters of nature as in the eighteenth century, to first-hand encounters of art that is more experimental, experiential, and avant-garde in contemporary times. Through this research, I will provide a better understanding of how contemporary art manifests the varying notions of the sublime in our current world, and that the philosophical concept of the sublime is still valid regardless of the era. The sublime is not fully acknowledged today as a spiritual experience, and yet several artists have attempted to re-create the experiences of awe, wonder, terror, vastness and the feelings of “smallness” through art without necessarily being explicit on their religious ideas or motivations. The primary impetus for my thesis then, is to determine how re-creations of the sublime in art reflect society’s need for transcendence and the sublime or spiritual experience.

## Chapter Two: Emulating the Power of Nature and Disaster in Art

Nature has always been referred to as sublime in Burkean terminology. With the terrifying power of natural disasters, ecological wonders, and incomprehensible natural habitats and wide spaces, the sublime has always been attributed to nature as its source by romantic and modern-day scholars. In *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Morley writes that nature mainly brings contemporary art back into the eighteenth-century notions of the romantic sublime with the natural world as the main source of the sublime experience.<sup>44</sup> With this statement, a question comes to mind: does the Burkean model of the sublime still resonate in contemporary times especially among artists who try to depict or emulate nature? In this chapter, I am investigating how Burke's notion of the sublime, its meaning and representation situate in the present, to see its relevance in current society. I am also using Tsang's framework and exploring how his theories apply to Albanese's *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides*, particularly how these artifacts could trigger memories of traumatic experiences and Tsang's so-called "life-limits."

### Matthew Albanese's *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides*

Matthew Albanese is an artist whose work involves the construction of small-scale models or sets using various materials from purchased to found everyday objects, to create highly realistic and emotive landscapes. He plans every aspect of the construction with a painstaking process using pre-planned methods and altering lighting which forces the placement of the viewer's perspective especially when photographed from a specific angle.<sup>45</sup> As he puts it,

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<sup>44</sup> Morley, *The Sublime*, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Dick Goody, *Ethics of Depiction: Landscape, Still-Life, Human* (Michigan: Oakland University Art Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 2017), 9.

“using a mixture of photographic techniques such as scale, depth of field, white balance and lighting, I am able to drastically alter the appearance of my materials.”<sup>46</sup> Albanese is less interested in portraying absolute realism; he is fascinated by miniatures and as his methods become more simplified, it allows him to build more complex sets. As he says, “miniatures were always what I found the most fascinating particularly how the methods used to film or shoot an object would affect one’s perception of it.”<sup>47</sup> His use and placement of the camera to shoot and position a viewer’s perspective is particularly evident in his two works: *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides*.

*Wildfire* (see fig. 1) by Albanese is a photograph of a miniature set of a burning forest. It is made up of mixed media such as wood, moss, yellow glitter, clear garbage bags, cooked sugar, Scotch-Brite pot scrubbers, bottle brushes, clipping from a bush in bloom (white flowers) clear thread, sand, tile grout (coloring), wire, paper and alternating yellow, red and orange party bulbs.<sup>48</sup> Albanese created the illusion of fire by using alternating colors of light bulbs. The effect creates an astounding appearance of a burning forest, with the barks of the trees seemingly collapsing from the fire. The clear garbage bags and bottle brushes produces the effect of trees burning against a yellow-orange lit background which visually mimics fire. The melted sugar produces the watery effect of the stream, and the moss, wood, scrubbers, and sand all together produced a mesmerizing and believable picture of a real burning forest.

Likewise, *Fighting Tides* (see fig. 2) is a photograph of a miniature replication of a stormy sea at night. Albanese used his creative ingenuity yet again to recreate this scenario. The

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<sup>46</sup> Goody, *Ethics of Depiction*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Albanese, “Wildfire,” accessed November 1, 2018, <https://www.matthewalbanese.com/wildfire#1>.

waves were made out of melted paraffin wax and cotton that was poured into a cookie sheet to harden. A heat gun was then used to shape each wave and to roll the wax over. The big explosions of water were made of baking soda, and crayons were used to add color to the wax. To create the stormy effect, Albanese used a spray bottle with water blown by a fan. This produces a heightened effect of large tidal waves in a stormy night, producing an almost hypnotically appealing yet alarming confrontation of a potentially deadly situation. The photograph is reminiscent of a Turner painting, providing viewers with a picture of a wonderful albeit terrifying representation of a deadly sea voyage. It is evident in this image that the same mechanics were employed by Albanese to reproduce an illusion to locate the viewer's positioning on the foreground, with a frontal perspective of the ensuing storm. Even without the presence of the hull of a boat or ship to ground the viewer's placement, a viewer who deems it as real would presume that a person was on a boat to photograph the sea.

To produce these two almost believable scenarios, Albanese situated the camera in front of the set, leveled and carefully angled it toward the diorama. The camera placement conveyed the vantage point of a real-life viewer observing from a boat. This strategy thereby produces a human standpoint or eye-level view creating the illusion of a true-to-life witnessing of a raging fire from a distance, or of being on a boat battling tidal waves. But by looking at these images, the viewer realizes that the "spectator" (i.e. photographer) was on a boat that was leading toward the fire, or the abyss of the sea. This realization could elicit a number of possibilities: awe, amazement, wonder, or that the "spectator" was in relative danger when he took the photo. In addition, a viewer of the images may focus *not* on the perceived "danger" of the photographer, but by the beauty and mesmerizing appeal of the burning forest, or of the raging waves—while at the same time be horrified by the amount of destruction and potential death to life, nature,

wildlife and surrounding areas that the images depicted. This realization reminds viewers of the catastrophic dangers of tidal waves and wildfires seen on TV or social media. The recognition could potentially trigger memories of traumatic experiences of witnessing catastrophic dangers as it applies to the viewer—whether or not the viewer recognizes that the waves in the stormy night, or the fire and forest in the photos are not real.

*Wildfire* is particularly relevant in relation to the forest fires that occurred in certain places in different parts of the world in more recent months and years. Forest fires or wildfires are uncontrolled fires occurring in rural or forested areas with combustible vegetation usually ignited by a variety of factors: from artificial and human causes or interferences, to natural causes such as volcanic eruption, weather, or dry climate. Although some natural occurring wildfires are considered beneficial to the ecosystem of native vegetations, wildfires can cause widescale destruction to nature, property, animal and human life. As an artifact, *Wildfire* creates this threshold in the human psyche: an encounter with impending danger, disaster, death, and destruction that reminds a viewer of a life-limit. Having these associations, *Wildfire* could thus elicit strong emotions from viewers, and these emotions are considered to be characteristic responses to the notion of the sublime.

*Fighting Tides* is also a timely depiction of what goes on at sea, common to the seafarer yet uncommon to those who don't venture out into the wide expanse of the ocean. It also alludes to the recent natural disasters and tsunamis that have ravaged different countries, flattened cities and taken so many lives over the last two decades alone. In addition, it references the melting ice caps in the north and south poles, and impending natural disasters due to climate change. As an artifact, *Fighting Tides* confronts the viewer within the mind of a terrifying possibility of drowning and loss of life. It adds a sense of fear in human perception of going beyond the

threshold of existence, and of what lies in that space in the human psyche. The gap in mind is where the pain (and pleasure or delight) lies, and where the sublime could be found in Kantian theory. But in the Burkean sense, the sublime could be the object, and in this case *the photographs* of both artifacts: *Fighting Tides* and *Wildfire*.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke notes that any object or nature that evokes the experience of pain and danger is a source of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>49</sup>

Burke believes that the strongest emotion is pain and terror, which is caused by the fear of death. Hence the sublime is grounded in terror, yet it can also provide a sense of pleasure, awe, or wonder and astonishment. Burke asserts that it is this sense of astonishment that suspends our faculties of rational thought and reason:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 33-34.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

This state of “astonishment” when our rational faculties have been suspended is what Burke regards as terrifying when it is in tandem with the unknown or “obscurity.” The source of the terror is a sublime object when humans are robbed of agency to think and understand rationally. Burke further regards the sublime object as a source of fear and terror regardless of size or scale:

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on anything as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, if witnessing a *real* wildfire from afar, or experiencing strong tidal waves while on a boat or ship could trigger such emotions, then faux pictures representing these events such as Albanese’s *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* may be capable of evoking the emotions and sentiments to a life-limit, alluding to the sublime in the Burkean sense. Although *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* if reproduced as small or medium-sized print photographs on a book or postcard may not elicit the same reactions or experiences of fear and terror to a viewer, the artifacts could still be a source of these emotions to another depending on their associative thinking, particularly if the viewer has had first-hand experiences of a real wildfire or of tidal waves. But if these images were reproduced in large-scale format equivalent to the size of a nine-foot tall wall, or projected on a large-screen, the images could potentially consume and confront any viewer with a recognition and self-awareness of the limit of one’s own existence. These limit-situations are Tsang Lap-Chuen’s basis for developing his framework of the sublime experience, which he believes are all essential in the human experience. These experiences are a manifestation of

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<sup>51</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 47.

associative thinking, which Tsang describes as a source of the sublime rather than the object or phenomenon itself.

In his book *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory*, Tsang characterizes the sublime “as that which transports man to a realization of himself at the limit of his existence, each giving the sublime an explication based on his own life and experience.”<sup>52</sup> Tsang believes that the sublime is not contained within an object, so there is no actual, consistent attribute of objects construed as “sublime.” But rather, the sublime experience depends on the mental and emotional state or associative thinking of the viewer and whether he regards the object as sublime:

An experience of the sublime occurs when someone apprehends an object, interpreting it in a certain way, such that the object elicits a set of thoughts and reactions pertaining to certain themes, including the limits of the person’s own powers and abilities, and the importance of being able to go up to or even beyond those limits as conceived. Such evocation also constitutes an emotional state: it is not a matter, as it were, of merely calculating what is at the limits of possibility.<sup>53</sup>

Tsang provides a framework which serves as a guide to determine what constitutes a sublime experience. Tsang believes that an experience of the sublime “occurs when someone apprehends an object” whether it is an event, thing, action or a situation that it extracts reactions, feelings, and thoughts pertaining to certain themes that include limits of one’s own abilities, existence, and the importance of transcending these perceived limits.<sup>54</sup> Tsang characterizes the sublime experience based on four aspects: construal, evocation, affectivity, and instantiation:

I The Subject *construes* the object in a particular way.

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<sup>52</sup> Tsang, *The Sublime*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

II The object *evokes* in the subject certain thoughts and reactions

III The subject is in a certain kind of *affective* state with regard to the object.

IV The object is taken to *instantiate* something important in a particular way for the subject.<sup>55</sup>

When one sees the image of *Wildfire*, a viewer sees it such as it is, which is a depiction of a burning forest (and quite possibly a real one at first glance). A viewer could thus think of it in a certain way—such as forest fires in general mean danger and destruction. Likewise, when one sees the image of *Fighting Tides*, the viewer will see it as such and could also think of it as tidal waves mean potential drowning and death. This apprehension—which is to apprehend something as it is and interpret it in another way—is what is being *construed* and what Tsang names as a paradigm-case of *construal*. The experience, however, should involve a self-realization of a limit of one's own powers, abilities or existence in life within the situation. These limit-situations are what Tsang refers to as “life-limits.” Therefore, a viewer who sees *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* for the first time could *apprehend* these as photos that represent death and destruction. For Tsang, these objects or events that are construed as sublime are “likely to be regarded as relevant and important for what they are” and will thus evoke reactions, feelings and ideas of different kinds to the viewer.<sup>56</sup>

*Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* as artifacts are *evocative* as to how these are *construed* by the viewer. These can be evocative of different ideas and reactions by the viewer toward the sublime. A viewer who sees either of the two artifacts may see each differently such as the beauty and sublimity of fire in the image and the mesmerizing appeal of the burning forest, or of the hypnotic effect of waves and wonder toward the seemingly infinite abyss beyond the waves

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<sup>55</sup> Tsang, *The Sublime*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

and storm. Yet, it may not be the same for another viewer who apprehends these as images of danger, thus eliciting fear of death and terror. Another viewer might see these images more as triggers and could then elicit traumatic memories and feelings of helplessness *as* a life-limit.

Tsang characterizes that these associative thoughts and reactions are centered around the essential point of being made aware of man's self-realization at the limit of his being, which is a core theme of the second aspect he calls *evocation*.<sup>57</sup>

Tsang also notes that *affectivity* is an essential part of the experience of the sublime.<sup>58</sup> He notes that the sublime situation a person finds himself in at a limit of his own being could be both uplifting and limiting, depending on the reactive response of the person or viewer: "The affective aspect of the sublime is important. From his affective state with regard to the object, we see how the person evaluates it, i.e. taking it as relevant and important as a sublime object."<sup>59</sup> A viewer of *Wildfire* or of *Fighting Tides* could identify each as relevant because each image serves as a reminder of the destructive force of uncontrolled fire or water, or man's inadequacy to protect, control, or conserve nature and prevent catastrophes. These images could also be relevant to a viewer who has witnessed a real wildfire, storm-surge or a tsunami, or traumatic for someone who has experienced or witnessed tragedy in such events. Tsang emphasizes that feelings can either be proemotion (that of elation) or antiemotion (limiting) such that there is no single emotional state in relation to the sublime.<sup>60</sup> However these emotional states are only possible and limited to certain objects or events that are *construed* as sublime and *evocative* of the thoughts and ideas of the *sense* of sublime.

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<sup>57</sup> Tsang, *The Sublime*, 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

Tsang believes that the sublime, though unrepresentable, is *instantiable* in any event, situation, or object, provided that the subject or viewer construes it as sublime. Viewing *Wildfire* or *Fighting Tides* if construed as such—evoking and affecting various responses from viewers as mentioned above—could be identified as an *instantiation* of the sublime because of the instance of self-realization at the limit of one’s own existence or being, at that *very instant* or moment.

The experience of the sublime is evoked by an event or an object. These events or objects symbolize a concept or an idea. Burke’s theories on the sublime can account for the prevailing ideas and experiences during his time in the eighteenth century, while placing the sublime as inherent in the event or object itself. The sublime however cannot be represented, hence there is no common feature to identify sublime objects, situations or events. However, the associations projected by viewers are what constitute the sublime and there is no one single emotional state to identify it based on Tsang’s framework. The Burkean sublime may no longer be considered relevant in twenty-first century philosophy and aesthetics. However, Burke’s theory still resonates not in a full sense, but with modified understanding of *what objects* could *construe* the sublime experience. Although manufactured, contemporary art that seeks to emulate nature evoking the experience of the sublime would support Burke’s view well in our times. *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* despite being staged depictions of nature, reveal a greater truth: that of nature’s overwhelming power of destruction and renewal, death and restoration, and of beauty in the midst of a disaster unfolding. The catastrophes that Albanese meticulously recreates invite viewers to uphold the truth that humanity is in a precipice on earth, whether it be in a tangible sense that nature is and will overcome us, or intangibly that our lives are temporary and that everyone is in the brink of the unknown once they cross over the threshold. *Wildfire* and *Fighting Tides* thus encourage viewers to think about the conditions of human existence and life,

referring back to the important original associations of the term “sublime” as described by Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757. This existential wonder is a sublime experience which is integral to human existence.

### Chapter Three: Re-Creating the Sublime Experience through Artificiality

We now live in a new age that has become increasingly more visual, digital, and artificial. Gone are the days wherein first-hand experiences of encountering nature in its pure form would account for emotional feelings of awe, pleasure and distant fear. Nowadays people access information on a device, or mediate experiences through a visit at a theme park with simulated motifs or a site-specific spectacle. As Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam and Jacob Wamberg note in their book *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity*:

So, in whatever form we meet the remnants of ‘nature’ in twentieth-century art, it is in a clearly de-sentimentalized form in which nature no longer stands out as a clearly recognizable other stabilizing culture and the subject. [...] all of which let their otherness bloom inside a double armature of technology and art.<sup>61</sup>

Although the *repeated viewing* of images on devices or repeated experiencing of technological feats or natural phenomena through artificial, mechanical means somehow diminishes the experience of the sublime *in the mind*, it will not replace actual physical encounters with the *real*, natural phenomenon such as an overwhelmingly beautiful sunset, being on top of Mount Everest, a volcanic eruption, raging wildfire, melting ice caps, storm-surges and tsunamis. But can the experience of the sublime be manufactured artificially by man, and construed in the mind of the viewer? In this chapter, I am proposing that the sublime could still be located in first-hand encounters of art that imitates nature through reproduction and artificiality, using Olafur Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* (see fig. 3) and Mariele Neudecker’s *Over and Over, Again and Again* (see fig. 4) as points of reference. I am also demonstrating how these works are appropriate examples for how complexity in art can manifest the Kantian sublime and support

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<sup>61</sup> Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam, and Jacob Wamberg, *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 27.

Lyotard's argument about sublimity in the avant-garde or the negative representation of the unrepresentable.

### **Olafur Eliasson and *The Weather Project***

Olafur Eliasson (born 1967) is a Danish-Icelandic artist who recreates weather-based natural phenomena through sophisticated structures. Eliasson's works fall outside the conventional forms of sculpture and representations of "nature." He uses mechanical devices generated by technology "to simulate natural phenomena in installations" which he situates either in outdoor environments or within a museum context.<sup>62</sup> He has recreated the moon, melting ice, fog, rain, and even a sun, and has garnered international acclaim for his projects. Eliasson's art engages the faculties and corporeal senses of viewers in ways that enable audiences to experience, enjoy, meditate or reflect upon them. This is often demonstrated through his use of mist, sound, light, and temperature to stimulate a person's senses. Eliasson explores the intersection between science, nature and physics, manifested through the interface of art and design, technology and architecture in an indoor or outdoor environment. Despite being artificially produced, his installations of natural phenomena are "technologically domesticated" thus making the art manageable and controllable.<sup>63</sup>

Eliasson seeks to engage the whole physical body of a viewer encountering his art. He aims for his art to be an interactive artistic experience co-produced by spectators based on their behavior. In his words:

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<sup>62</sup> Hanna Johansson, "Images of Rain between Representation, Technology and Nature," in *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity*, eds. Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam and Jacob Wamberg (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 192.

<sup>63</sup> Johansson, "Images of Rain," 195.

By staging natural phenomena through a mechanical setup and making this discoverable for the audience, I allow the viewer to become co-author of the experience. I am now particularly interested in how the viewer's co-production of the work can build shared confidence in the art situation, which, although typically found in a museum or an exhibition, can also be in an environment where art is not announced or institutionalized.<sup>64</sup>

Eliasson hopes that viewers would interact more responsibly in the artificial setting he recreates to “evoke the experience of physically moving about in a natural landscape.”<sup>65</sup> Instead of reading nature or landscape as two dimensional phenomena, viewers must engage with it through physical movement.<sup>66</sup> Eliasson believes in the importance of physically interacting with landscape (whether natural or artificial) to break the two-dimensionality of space and to gain the three-dimensionality of the body back.<sup>67</sup> In his words:

Still, I think the greater potential in landscape and nature lies not in the beautiful view itself, but rather in the less spectacular, pragmatic activity of walking to the outlook point. The journey or the time it takes to get there, the trajectory or the sense of path, the process in which you negotiate the scale, the depth, the quality of the line, the movement of the sun—these are the strongest tools for rediscovering our own bodies. Our respiration, our physicality, our muscular activity and our thinking in the actual act of travelling through the landscape are of incredible importance.<sup>68</sup>

This therefore enables the contemplation of landscape from a two-dimensional panoramic spectacle view, to a more interactive three-dimensional experience that is bodily accessible, as

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<sup>64</sup> Jacob Wamberg, “It Is the City That Makes the Walking What It Is: Interview with Olafur Eliasson, in His Studio in Hellerup, Copenhagen, November 7, 2012,” in *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity*, eds. Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam and Jacob Wamberg (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 225

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

manifested in the sophisticated staging of his art installations. This is particularly evident in one of his most important works, *The Weather Project*.

In 2003, a massive installation entitled *The Weather Project* was staged at the Turbine Hall in London's Tate Modern as part of the Unilever-sponsored series of large-scale exhibitions. Eliasson's site-specific work was the fourth commission in the series. It measured 87 5/8 by 73 1/8 by 510 feet in total.<sup>69</sup> A semi-circular projection screen was employed, which was then backlit by two hundred monofrequency sodium-yellow lamps, along with aluminum and scaffolding. A giant foil mirror served to reflect the semi-circular screen as a full sun, and to double the volume of the hall visually.<sup>70</sup> In addition, haze or fog machines were used to release mist into the air and space creating an illusion of a real natural phenomenon in an indoor environment. Visitors to the Tate were greeted by a spacious and sepulchral space that is the Turbine Hall, with a gigantic glowing yellow orb at the end of the hall that visually mimicked the sun. Eliasson never hid how the installation was created, as with his previous artworks. The structure of the "sun" from the top floor was visible to anybody who walked up to the far end of the hall. Viewers then could tell that the sun was only a half-circle made out of foil. Although the giant orb emitted light, there was no warmth or heat generated.<sup>71</sup> In addition, when viewers looked up to the ceiling, they would see their own reflections, as mirrors were installed to further amplify the volume of the space. Mist would then fill the hall to diffuse the "spell-binding glow" of the sun, effectively blurring "boundaries and edges" which thus added to the ethereal and

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<sup>69</sup> Anna Engberg-Pedersen, and Michelle Kuo, contribs., *Olafur Eliasson Experience* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2018), 188.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Israel, *The Big Picture: Contemporary Art in 10 Works by 10 Artists* (London: Prestel Publishing Ltd., 2017), 38.

mystifying experience.<sup>72</sup> In preparation for the exhibition, Eliasson sent out a survey to the employees of the Tate. The survey included questions like “Has a weather phenomenon ever changed the course of your life dramatically?” and “To what extent do you find the weather affects your mood?”<sup>73</sup> The results of the survey were used to promote and advertise the exhibition, without using any imagery.<sup>74</sup> This strategy built an element of surprise and anticipation among the people.

Eventually, *The Weather Project* became the most popular exhibition among the Unilever series. More than two million people from different parts of the world came to visit the exhibition at the Tate. Eliasson’s spectacular and thought-provoking work became a cultural phenomenon because of the large number of people who wanted to experience it. Audience reaction was as varied as the people that came to see. Some people sat on the floor or laid down to contemplate the experience while staring at the “sun.” However, others were enamored more by the mirrors high above them and spent time locating their reflections by creating physical movements to identify themselves. There were also certain groups that used their bodies to spell out words on the floor in reverse, utilizing the mirrored-ceilings as a massive advertisement to promote or protest politics in a public space.<sup>75</sup> This effectively established group participation to viewers, which was essential to the experience. As noted by Matthew Israel in his book *The Big Picture*:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>73</sup> Susan May, ed. *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 63.

<sup>74</sup> Israel, *The Big Picture*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 37.

Although the overall response by the general public was positive, there were a few critics who noted the darker or more negative aspects of the *Weather Project*, as Carol Diehl highlighted in *Art in America*, quoted in Matthew Israel’s book *The Big Picture*. Yet these reactions as suggested by Diehl were only “footnotes to the greater experience of the work.”

It was a rare opportunity for light and community (especially in the winter months); it allowed people to stop and relax in a museum, [...] it created an almost spiritual experience, harking back to one of the earliest objects of worship, the sun; it also created a space for people to exercise their freedom of speech about significant political issues.<sup>76</sup>

Eliasson had always intended for his art to be a bodily and collective experience to engage the senses completely. As he noted in an interview with Anna Engberg-Pedersen, "By walking you start to render space and scale in your brain, and this creates an acute sense of presence. [...] Movement is really sense-making."<sup>77</sup> He also further explained how the *Project* was a collective experience:

The Weather Project (2003) at Tate Modern was almost always a group experience; the presence of numerous visitors gave space and volume to the work. [...] Sharing a space with art can make you conscious that each of the people with whom you share the space is having a unique experience of the work, without regarding these other views as counterproductive to the quality of your own experience.<sup>78</sup>

Eliasson specifically makes work where the collective experience of being together is an amplifier. He utilizes big and vast spaces to try to create an inclusive theatrical experience despite the number of people present.<sup>79</sup>

In *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, Brady emphasizes that even though most art is not sublime in the original sense, it could still be sublime through association and subject matter. However, she considers some land art and architecture as exemptions:

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<sup>76</sup> Israel, *The Big Picture*, 38.

<sup>77</sup> Engberg-Pedersen, *Olafur Eliasson Experience*, II.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, VI.

<sup>79</sup> Wamberg, "It Is the City That Makes the Walking What It Is," 233.

Although the arts can represent, convey, or express the sublime, these modes are not sufficient for sublimity itself, and constitute only derivative forms of it. Throughout my analysis, scale has come to the fore as a crucial feature, as well as the environment or setting of some object, and it is these features of skyscrapers and some works of land art that, largely, bring them into the fold.<sup>80</sup>

This reinforces the fact that some art could be used as a language of the sublime, in its evocation of the supersensible idea in the mind of the viewer. *The Weather Project*, in its scale, presentation (albeit indoor), and reception bring together what man is capable of and how the sublime could be manufactured artificially and construed in the mind of the viewer. It was a critical piece that brought environmental issues to the fore, albeit staged in a museum setting that was suitable for the indoor context that Eliasson was trying to mediate for the audiences. Most of Eliasson's works represent and call attention to current climate issues, and while *The Weather Project* was about the weather as per the artist's intent, it was not necessarily interpreted as such.<sup>81</sup> Although Eliasson's work is very timely especially in this age of environmental concern, his work also brings to light how experimenting with technology, architecture, and engineering work together to recreate a seemingly natural phenomenon for the sake of art, culture and experience in the twenty-first century. As scholar Hanna Johansson explicates in her essay, "Nature is no longer separate from culture; technology is intimately intertwined with natural processes and, in Eliasson's case, nature as such is called into question."<sup>82</sup> The combination of all these factors evoked an overwhelming and awestruck response from viewers—a testament to the effect of staging gigantic, sophisticated, and well-researched technological installation art in

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>81</sup> See Israel, *The Big Picture*, 39. The major issues brought upon by the *Project* had nothing to do with the weather and had mostly shed light to political issues at the time and raised questions on narcissism, community, art, life, spirituality and religion. It also raised discussions about the goals of installation art, museum programming, and how viewers should behave and engage with the works.

<sup>82</sup> Johansson, "Images of Rain," 186.

major structures, architecture or landmarks. In fact, the monumental experience was comparable to the associated aesthetic experiences when a viewer walks into the environment of the Sistine Chapel for the first time, or of participants in rave parties and dance floors in large clubs especially with mist involved.<sup>83</sup> Although historically it was not the first gigantic installation art ever produced, the success of Eliasson's *Weather Project* paved the way for institutions to team up with artists worldwide to create monumental-scale installation art that turn the indoor and outdoor architecture and environments to works of art themselves. Partnered with massive and all-encompassing grounds and spaces, this trend has turned museum interiors and exteriors as spectacles to produce the "wow" effect among viewers.<sup>84</sup>

In *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Jean-François Lyotard's notion of sublimity is connected to Kant's notions of the sublime. He re-positions the Kantian sublime to a more postmodern direction while focusing on art instead of nature.<sup>85</sup> Lyotard's sublime is ultimately best understood and manifested through abstract, avant-garde art. The avant-garde is capable of representing the *unpresentable* as captured in Kant's "mathematical sublime" wherein formlessness and boundlessness are considered as essential factors for what would be considered as sublime. In addition, Lyotard's understanding of Kant's sublime is that there is an inherent, transcendental feeling where the viewer is aware of a metaphysical experience or presence that *transcends* or goes beyond the object or art.<sup>86</sup> Some critics saw *The Weather Project* as comparable to J.M.W. Turner's works, such as "Sun Rising Through Vapour," along with the more avant-garde works of the twentieth century, such as Rothko's color fields.<sup>87</sup> The subjects of

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<sup>83</sup> Israel, *The Big Picture*, 41.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>85</sup> Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 136.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>87</sup> Israel, *The Big Picture*, 39.

these works capture Kant's dynamic and mathematical sublime, and also allude to Lyotard's sublime where he associates the notion to experiences that offer deep existential questions about the meaning and importance of life and the existence of God. The sublime is the "artistic way to spirituality" in postmodern times, and this could be mediated through accessing art that is either traditional or technological.

*The Weather Project* had artistic cues that directed people's eyes and imagination in particular ways. Hence it lacked the "wildness" and "disorderliness" that are characteristic of the Kantian sublime. Although the installation did not physically possess Kant's characteristics of the mathematical and dynamical sublime, these categories could be apprehended by the viewer in perception. The *Project* did not seek to show a contained or bounded environment since mirrors were employed in the ceilings to visually double the hall and suggest a vast space. Mist was also used to create a natural atmosphere to blur and erase the tangible sharp structure or boundaries of the installation, which effectively conveyed formlessness and boundlessness characteristic of a borderless world of the mathematical sublime. The whole exhibition was a collective experience that required body movement which highlighted the three-dimensionality of the work.

Moreover, Lyotard's sentiments on the sublime in the avant-garde apply to Eliasson's *Project*. The essential mechanism of the experience for Lyotard is summarized in one short formula: the *presentation of the unrepresentable*.<sup>88</sup> Thus for Lyotard, the sublime is successful in presenting the unrepresentable through a negative representation. In the *Weather Project*, the experience of a sun-drenched atmosphere in an artificial environment represented a multi-sensory experience of a sophisticated "color-field" of warm yellow light that consumed

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<sup>88</sup> David B. Johnson, "The Postmodern Sublime: Presentation and Its Limits," in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Timothy M. Costelloe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120.

spectators. In addition, Eliasson's use of space at the Turbine Hall along with the expansive views of the ceiling aided in the presentation of a "negative representation" of *possibility* and of what the viewers could perceive in thought, such as the numinous and the state of human condition. Viewers who saw and experienced the exhibition were thus conferred with capabilities of construing different visual imagery and lofty ideas of the transcendental—of what cannot be represented. In addition, people who were confronted by the wide expansive space and the reflective mirrors were encouraged to explore different possibilities, as mentioned in the physical movements and bodily cohesion of spectators who were watching themselves in the giant mirror. These actions were provided to them by the negative space of the hall thereby enabling them in thought and perception to become creative in bodily movement and action—or reflective in solitary thought or critical observation of man's relation with the natural world and the environment. David B. Johnson describes this well in the following passage:

The sublime, in other words, is the aesthetic manifestation of thought's inexorable attraction to transcendental illusions: in sublime experience, thought tantalizes itself, as it were, with the possibility of discovering the absolute in phenomenal intuition by transgressing its own boundaries, boundaries that it, itself, establishes through critical reflection.<sup>89</sup>

Although the *Project* may not be *physically* characterized as a source of the sublime in the Kantian sense (mathematical and dynamical), it presented an *illusion* that had the power to evoke emotions and reactions characteristic still of Kant's (in human perception), the Burkean sublime (awe and wonder), Tsang's (life-limit), and Lyotard's (the unrepresentable) frameworks, based on the unique responses, emotions, and imaginations of viewers who came to see what the exhibition was all about. A key feature of the mathematical and dynamic sublime is "being

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<sup>89</sup> Johnson, "The Postmodern Sublime," 120.

overwhelmed in the face of something much greater than the subject.”<sup>90</sup> This feature was enabled in human perception as viewers of the *Project* were awestruck and felt small in relation to the depth, height and wide expanse of mirrors that doubled the space. In addition, the huge, yellow glowing orb “floating” high above created an illusion of the sun. Audiences had a variety of emotions and became spellbound, overwhelmed, imaginative, or playful as demonstrated by the examples. Moreover, the environmental situation at the Turbine Hall may have triggered feelings of a life-limit (discussed in previous chapter) that Tsang refers to, and thus may have evoked a metaphysical experience of one’s smallness and of things greater than oneself, which Lyotard highlights in his philosophy.

*The Weather Project* suggested a profundity alluding to the infinite that captured the boundlessness or “beyondness” that aligned with Kant’s mathematical sublime, suggesting the existence of the unrepresentable. More than just about the weather, it possessed the ability to recreate a potential first-time encounter with a natural phenomenon reminiscent of a sunrise in a post-apocalyptic world due to the expansive space and color. Although artificial, it had a “multi-sensory” experience and the possibility for a “place-based” appreciation of a metaphorical environment in the end of times, where the sun was the only object of worship—a symbol of hope for humanity—in an environmentally dead world.<sup>91</sup> *The Weather Project* was a complicated configuration of mechanical and technological advances, thereby establishing a tangible physicality and boundaries of the object. However, despite its materiality as an art installation, it conveyed an illusion and its effects to the human perception were that of an

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<sup>90</sup> Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*, 129.

<sup>91</sup> Words in quotations were the terms used by Brady to displace art as sublime in the original sense since, according to her, art lacks the “multi-sensory” and “placed-based” appreciation experienced by subjects encountering natural phenomena. I used her terminology in support of my argument, which counters Brady’s sentiments.

allusion to a negative presentation of *what cannot be represented* in nature: the existence in idea of the edge to that limit or threshold of what lies *beyond*.

### **Mariele Neudecker and *Over and Over, Again and Again***

Mariele Neudecker is a German artist born in Dusseldorf, Germany in 1965, and who lives and works in Bristol, United Kingdom. Her practice uses a broad range of media such as installation, sculpture, sound, film, and photography. Her works investigate the “formation and historical dissemination of cultural constructs around the natural world.”<sup>92</sup> She focuses primarily on representations of the Northern European romantic tradition of landscape. Neudecker draws inspiration from the transcendent romantic works of German artists Caspar David Friedrich and Karl Friedrich Schinkel, along with the artistic process and meditative landscapes of contemporary painter Gerhard Richter. Although her works portray poetic three-dimensional landscapes and mystical environments, her subject matter has very little to do with ongoing environmental issues and climate change:

My work has got very little to do with Global Warming. [...] It is important to emphasize the human interest or human connection to landscape which is what these landscapes are about. It is about human intervention, emphasis on the man-made, human interest or impact. My works are about our relationship with landscape and nature, or landscape and culture and nature. [...] and inevitably the connection of mortality comes to it.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Mariele Neudecker,” Homepage.

<sup>93</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Mariele Neudecker,” Vimeo video, 1:16:53, posted by “The Glasgow School of Art.” March 18, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/62065648>.

An important element to her work is exploring humanity's interest and relationship to the natural world. Her works are concerned about geographical navigation and the passage of time and incorporates elements of these themes "metaphorically for human psychology."<sup>94</sup> As she says:

What I'm trying to do with my work is most of the time looking at our perception of landscape—not so much about nature—but landscape as inhabited by humans. Looking at paintings coming from the romantic sublime era, German or Scandinavian. And what I've been trying to do for a long time is sort of represent and reframe those landscapes with the human psychology in mind that the landscape *represents something beyond what we see* obviously and the notion of foreground, midground and background is really interesting to me that you have a sense of time moving through the landscape.<sup>95</sup>

Neudecker is mostly known for her tank series composed of miniature sculptures of landscape scenes, mountains, trees and model ships by using a variety of objects inside glass vitrines filled with water. As the daughter of a chemist, Neudecker knows chemistry and treats the water with chemical mixtures, salt solutions and dyes to create clouds, mists, fog and atmospheric effects inside the tanks, making them seem like "little miracles."<sup>96</sup> The combination of these effects would bring into existence a contained climate which moderate and change with the course of time. This produces a dynamic and three-dimensional landscape scenery inside an aquarium. She tangibly replicates the notion of fog as well as clarity of scene which are typical of the eighteenth-century romantic paintings. She uses romantic paintings or photographs as inspiration. Neudecker takes a painting as a bouncing off reference for a concept, converting it

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<sup>94</sup> Arts at CERN, "Mariele Neudecker, Guest Artist: 2017, New Commission: 2018," accessed March 9, 2020. <https://arts.cern/artist/mariele-neudecker>.

<sup>95</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Hanging Gardens (Balconies) by Mariele Neudecker," YouTube video, 4:01, posted by "Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust," February 28, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crjad2JkjpM>.

<sup>96</sup> David Blayney Brown, "Mariele Neudecker: More Tracks in the Snow," in *Mariele Neudecker: Over and Over, Again and Again*, eds. Susan Daniel-McElroy, Sara Hughes and Kerry Rice (Saint Ives: Tate St. Ives, 2004), 20.

into a 360-degree interpretation to play with the notion of the foreground, middle ground and background while somehow remaining within the size or scale of the original painting reference.<sup>97</sup>

Neudecker works with engineers and scientists to aid her research and inform her practice and methods. She also uses the virtual capabilities of technology in order to reproduce a heightened experience or drama of the landscape to address the subjective and mediated condition of any firsthand encounter.<sup>98</sup> Neudecker believes that technology both enables and limits human perception and experience of the inhabited world. Thus, a core component in her work is perception and how people look at, perceive, and understand things and how perception and understanding constantly shifts and changes as viewers change their subjective reading.<sup>99</sup> Her tank works enable viewers to recognize an image or a visual memory, and to circumnavigate the installation and find very differing views at the foreground, middle ground and background and how the perception changes as a viewer moves around it. Her works mediate subjective experiences to viewers, as she says: “I am almost trying to engineer experiences that only last a short time and only believable for so long, but at the same time they are triggering memories of real experiences in your head.” She draws inspiration from other artists mentioned, her own knowledge and experiences, and goes through a laborious process of research, photography and creation. Her process and works are thus a “stepping back from the original experience.”<sup>100</sup> Her art thereby explores layering the representation of images in the mind from an actual physical

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<sup>97</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk: Mariele Neudecker in conversation with Parveen Adams,” YouTube video, 1:25:13, posted by Architectural Association School of Architecture, Lecture date February 11, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNENnYcOrhc>.

<sup>98</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Mariele Neudecker,” Homepage.

<sup>99</sup> Mariele Neudecker, “Artist Mariele Neudecker,” YouTube video, 2:11, posted by “Museum of Arts and Design,” July 22, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMLq3ApgeB4>.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

experience or encounter, and a visual memory—with the physicality of the tank installations containing water and chemistry combined with physics.

Neudecker's work entitled *Over and Over, Again and Again* (see fig. 4) is a poetic and melancholic piece reminiscent of German Romanticism. It is Neudecker's three-dimensional take on Karl Friedrich Schinkel's *The Gate in the Rocks* which is a painting that depicts a view of a sublime vista. *Over and Over, Again and Again* is composed of small mountainous landscapes with cliffs, grottoes, and peaks with tiny trees emerging from fog. In this piece, Neudecker dissected the landscape into three tanks representing a foreground, middle ground, and background. It is a triptych installation which has different scenes inside each tank that are separated out so viewers can see through the cave from the front, see rocks and a cliff in the middle ground, and see fogginess and mountain ridges in the background. Each tank has a different chemical solution to produce a foggy and misty representation of high-cliffs and far-off mountains. The result is a heightened effect of looking through a death-defying scene of a cliff—a potential plunge to an unknown void—and misty mountain-ridges at a distance, from high above an enclosing of a cave. David Blayney Brown describes her triptych as:

What would normally be experienced only from within or from its opening is presented in the round, and the reflections and transformations of the image from tank to tank echo those set up by a single case in an extended refrain. The effect is almost musical.<sup>101</sup>

The three tanks when taken in their entirety, provide viewers with a glimpse of a mountainous and treacherous vista with an abyss both at the bottom and beyond the mountains, when peering through the cave at the front. This unique set-up encourages viewers to look, read what's visible

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<sup>101</sup> Brown, "Mariele Neudecker: More Tracks in the Snow," 20.

and contemplate what's unknowable. In addition, her title *Over and Over, Again and Again* lets a viewer extrapolate different ideas and readings into the piece. For Neudecker, the titles are very important as she thinks long and hard to come up with the right title. The title *Over and Over, Again and Again* provides different layers of subjectiveness and visual imagery in human perception.

As with all of her other works, there is a time element conceptually implied within the tanks, which also changes as one goes around to view. *Over and Over, Again and Again* is an appropriate example of her work that conveys the passage of time. The triptych format implies the notion of time wherein the foreground is the past, the middle ground is the present, and the background as the future. But more than just time itself—with realistic rocky cliffs and foggy mountains—it also provides viewers with a visual recognition of boundless space in the distance and a mysterious void at the bottom—albeit an illusion—that are the more elemental pieces of her work. *Over and Over, Again and Again* is a tangible representation of a “landscape of the mind.” It enables viewers to look across a miniscule field of vision that alludes to the notion of the sublime. The fabricated worlds within Neudecker's tanks with the careful construction of nature combined with chemical solutions to simulate weather encapsulate the environment and atmosphere of a sublime moment in a viewer's memory. As Susan Daniel-McElroy, former director at the Tate St. Ives, noted:

Her tank pieces envelope our gaze, prickle our imagination and lure us in to see beyond the obvious—albeit enchanted—illusion, we know that this is no representation of reality. But our imagination is caught, we look beyond the pleasure principle, to see what is behind the illusion [...].<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Susan Daniel-McElroy, “Introduction,” in *Mariele Neudecker: Over and Over, Again and Again*, eds. Susan Daniel-McElroy, Sara Hughes, and Kerry Rice (Saint Ives: Tate St. Ives, 2004), 4.

Neudecker is more interested in the visual memory and images that accumulate in a viewer's mind to understand or define the sublime. It is central in her process to provide viewers with that subjective experience of her works. As she says, "I think that the notion that they are sublime lies very much with the viewer and their subjective readings."<sup>103</sup> She further notes that she is not "superimposing anything sublime onto landscapes" as it is about the personal reading of a viewer.<sup>104</sup> As she says, these tanks "invite the viewer to bring their own knowledge and culture and experience to them."<sup>105</sup> But just like Eliasson, she never hides how things are made: "I want the illusion to fail. It's about representation, mediation and artificiality, not nature."<sup>106</sup> It is important for Neudecker that viewers are allowing themselves the illusion to work—and eventually fail—so that a viewer "might hit" his "nose against the glass."<sup>107</sup> The edges of the tanks inform the cropping of her work as the "cropped image" of a Friedrich, Schinkel or Richter is how her works start from.<sup>108</sup> But despite the tangible boundaries in her art, the scenes within the tanks allude to the sublime, whilst providing different access points for the viewer. As she says:

There's always a horizon line within these landscapes that seems to imply an abyss and unknown behind but at the same time there's the option of just walking around it and seeing it and knowing that there is only another crop and a very similar kind of scene. Cropping and framing is very important.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

<sup>104</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

<sup>105</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker," Vimeo video.

<sup>106</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Neudecker refers to paintings and other images as the "cropped image."

<sup>109</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

In *Over and Over, Again and Again*, the boundaries are completely visible, hence it does not necessarily replicate Kant's mathematical sublime which arises when the infinity or vastness is incomprehensible. However, it makes it possible for viewers to perceive in their minds the *boundlessness* or a "mental-cliff edge" to an unknown void or abyss beneath the cliffs, and an infinite sky beyond the mountain ranges. *Over and Over, Again and Again* provides a viewer with an arm-chair experience of a sublime vista with a deathly drop to an eternal abyss. It taps into a person's recognition and visual memory of things past, a previous natural encounter, a melancholic or traumatic experience, or fear of the unknown. These feelings trigger commonly associated responses to the sublime: awe, wonder, phobia or terror. In addition, it stirs up instantaneous feelings of mortality and the numinous that Tsang references in his framework of the sublime experience. What *Over and Over, Again and Again* alludes to is the numinous *unpresentable*, the unknown void beyond the threshold or "mental-cliff edge" in human perception. Although this piece has realistic elements within, the void that is made visible in human perception is represented by the negative space within her tanks. These spaces encapsulated within the boundaries of the glass vitrines are evocative of the negative representation in avant-garde art—attributed as a source of the sublime by Lyotard—as the essential mechanism of the sublime experience is the presentation of the unpresentable. In addition, Neudecker's tanks are purposely void of humans or animal models. In her words:

They are very empty and meant to be very empty but there are traces of somebody having been there always. There'll be some evidence of a human being who has been in that landscape. It's never an untouched landscape. There's always a little can or a cross or bench or whatever evidence—a road or tunnel.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

The reference to human traces affirms what her works are about: the relationship of man to nature. Moreover, the *negative* or nonexistent representation of mankind as a figurative model also reinforces ideas of mortality and the afterlife—a mystery that is beyond human comprehension. Although Neudecker does not inject implied narratives in her works, the traces of man she purposefully leaves behind—particularly the bench by the trees in the second tank—allow for an open interpretation. Did the person die? Did he fall off the edge of the cliff? The absence of figures in her work adds to the emptiness and the negative representation of what cannot be represented, and this makes *Over and Over, Again and Again* successful in conveying a void and enabling subjectiveness in a viewer's perception. The sublime in Neudecker's art is construed by the associations that a viewer perceives when peering through the cave of *Over and Over, Again and Again*.

In addition, the smallness of Neudecker's tank works is not the first thing that strikes people. *Over and Over, Again and Again*—despite being a miniature representation of a panoramic landscape—does not read as such. This work, along with her other tanks relate to the scale or size of Friedrich's and Schinkel's paintings. Neudecker says that:

The tanks do relate to that sort of painting-type size. So, the fact that you look into newspapers every day and the photographs are much smaller and you don't even think for a minute that they are miniatures. It's got a lot to do with that constant perceiving of tiny images. You are so used to looking at photographs with tiny people on them and you wouldn't think of them as miniatures. [...] In a way they are miniatures, but they are models in my mind probably more than miniatures—I don't think of them that way. They are models that allow you to find positions and viewpoints to look down at them or up.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Mariele Neudecker, "Mariele Neudecker – Artist Talk," YouTube video.

The possibility for various positions of visual access in her works emphasize the necessity for smaller-scale works. By having smaller works, Neudecker is enabling people to access all the different viewing points, which is integral to her work. Although her tanks are not large, the complexity and cleverness of her art make it possible to evoke the sublime experience in the minds of the viewers. Although Neudecker does not purposefully facilitate the experience of the sublime in her art, *Over and Over, Again and Again* induces recognition and imagination through the faculty, thereby opening up possibilities for an affective and instantaneous sublime experience. The visible emptiness within her tanks enhance the unrepresentable void in her works and viewers' minds. Moreover, the complexity of Neudecker's work adds an element of awe and wonder to the capabilities of chemistry and physics inside a controlled tank. Neudecker's works provide compelling evidence that scale isn't necessary to evoke the sublime. Sophistication and complexity in art has the power to affect a viewer's perception and imagination. As Crowther notes:

Stated in these terms, Kant's theory can encompass the domain of human artifice, without much further modification. If some human artefact is of colossal size or of terrifying power or *employs images which successfully invoke a sense of such overwhelming properties*, then this can serve to make vivid the extraordinary scope of human artifice itself.<sup>112</sup>

In Kant's theory, the sublime is something that is extremely overwhelming in its power and destructive force or incomprehensible vastness that the mental faculties are not able to perceive. Lyotard, however, builds upon Kant's theory and theorizes that the sublime can be evoked by objects that may not necessarily be large, powerful or incomprehensible, but overwhelming enough in complexity. As Crowther notes:

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<sup>112</sup> Emphasis in italics is mine. Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime," 68.

[...] the merit of Lyotard's more general approach is to extend this and show the experience of the sublime can arise through the mediation of knowledge and data, from objects which, in themselves, may not be physically vast or destructive but, rather, overwhelm us by their *complexity*. [...] Modern techno-scientific culture has, therefore, created a genuine postmodern sensibility. We take pleasure not simply in the beauty of phenomenal surfaces, but in the de-materialization of these by techno-science. A realm that is perceptually and imaginatively ungraspable as a totality, in other words, not only vivifies, but, indeed, is opened up by the project of rational endeavor itself. *The sublime can now be created in the laboratory, as well as in the artist's studio.*<sup>113</sup>

Complexity of the work and the embodied representation of a recognized visual memory into a physicality enable viewers to experience a sublime moment. The tangible representations of images and the three-dimensionality of Neudecker's art offer the viewer different perceptions. The interchangeability of the foreground, middle ground and background reinforce different ideas, memories, and visual images in the viewer, along with the miraculous recreations of atmosphere and weather creating an illusion of a foregone world.

The sublime allows mankind to consider meaning and transcendence in life. Man's imagination cannot fully grasp infinity beyond a life-limit or a mental-cliff edge. Eliasson's and Neudecker's sublime is limited to the power of human perception and imagination by the viewer, and this moment opens up a plethora of possibilities. Gaston Bachelard explains this effect well in the following passage:

One might say that immensity is a philosophical category of daydream. Daydream undoubtedly feeds on all kinds of sights, but through a sort of natural inclination, it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity. [...] In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are the *by-products* of

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 74-75

this existentialism of the imagining being. In this direction of daydreams of immensity, the real *product* is consciousness of enlargement. We feel that we have been promoted to the dignity of the admiring being.

Immensity is within ourselves, it is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense.<sup>114</sup>

Triggered by a sense of infinity, the viewer perceives something beyond the self. Through varying degrees, Eliasson's and Neudecker's works inadvertently become effective in evoking the sublime experience by engaging the viewer's faculties. Artefactual sublimity through artificiality is thus possible. *The Weather Project* and *Over and Over, Again and Again* enable the possibility to transcend *momentarily* in the present.

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<sup>114</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 183-84.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

The sublime resides in the mind, and the experience itself is composed of emotional and mental configurations that emerge from various experiential conditions. This can be evoked through different means such as natural, social or historical events, nature, literature, music, technology and art. In the process of writing this thesis, it has become evident that the sublime can be construed or evoked through artefactual means. Man thus has the ability to manufacture the experience of the sublime in human perception, and art is just one of the mediums.

The sublime has been more popularly associated in landscape painting during the romantic period. But as depictions of the sublime in art has evolved through time, each new representation or spectacle displaces or undermines previous iterations of the sublime in art. As society advanced in industry and technology, two-dimensional and naturalistic landscape painting no longer hold the same enthusiasm nowadays as it did during Caspar David Friedrich's, Pierre-Jacques Volaire's, William Mallord Turner's and Frederic Edwin Church's times. The concept of the sublime—previously found in nature during the time of exploration—enabled these artists to re-create magnificent paintings of newfound natural discoveries or of allegorical compositions inspired by the environment. These paintings were meant to serve as representational and almost-photographic evidence of these natural wonders, or to represent lofty ideals and scenarios in imagined landscapes. Moreover, banality and ennui are affective states unique and predominant in modern and contemporary society, as repeated viewing somehow diminishes the experience of a first-time encounter. Repetition, it seems, robs viewers of an awe-inspiring, terrifying, or overwhelming experience. Thus, as industries and technologies become increasingly more complex, older representations of objects that inspire awe, wonder, and excitement become less remarkable, paving the way for artists to create unique and more

spectacular artistic feats that serve as an escape or entertainment to viewers looking for an experience. Artists have sought for new ways in expressing religious transcendence and hence, there is new interest in techniques for evocative representation of subjects. This shift in art-making is also combined with contemporary society's affection for spectacular feats or original and unique representations of the environment. Thus, the sublime now finds expression in the "sophisticated staging of nature" and is now anchored in art that is three-dimensional, avant-garde, or innovative reconstructions of ideas and concepts that exist in the mind.<sup>115</sup> These ideas construe transcendental notions of what lies beyond the threshold: infinity and the divine that cannot properly be represented by any medium. But art that depicts nature in whatever contemporary form it might take can be a language of these ideas and serve as a springboard that would take human perception into the depths of thought leading to these allusions.

Many contemporary artists have sought to capture the experience of the sublime through works that incite fear, interior reflection, amazement or entertainment. These works can be created with an array of media forms and presented through methods that would adapt to the current society's visual predilections. These works are evocative of the sentiments of contemporary culture: fear, anxiety, boredom, helplessness, and of wonder and inquisitiveness to things unknown to man. These sentiments are provoked by a variety of factors and events paramount in contemporary life: climate change, environmental degradation and destruction, and technological advances. Thus, contemporary art can be used as a language of the sublime and this is manifested through artificial, multi-sensory, immersive, meditatively simple, complex, or spectacular representations of nature or of a dying environment. Matthew Albanese's, Olafur

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<sup>115</sup> Phrase in italics is by Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam, and Jacob Wamberg.  
Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam, and Jacob Wamberg, *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 27.

Eliasson's, and Mariele Neudecker's works all provide an element of the sublime. Based on Tsang's framework, their works give a glimpse of the present—of the being *there* and being in the moment of confrontation to a life-limit. Their works are realistic and also in some ways abstract—in the cases of Eliasson's and Neudecker's. Yet as these artists may have sought to express an idea, they also inevitably recorded environmental phenomena as a matter of concern. Their works provide viewers with a moment to contemplate an illusion: the suggestion of death, mortality, and of crossing-over toward the unknown abyss. Albanese's works provide a distinct understanding of the Burkean sublime, whereas Eliasson's and Neudecker's works suggest a *modified* configuration of Lyotard's reference to avant-garde art, wherein the abstract or negative representation of the existence of the *unpresentable* lies in the presentation of *nothingness* in physical space, suggesting infinity and transcendent ideas in the mind.

The works by these three contemporary artists are exploratory yet evocative attempts of searching for the spiritual, and of representing transcendent ideas in postmodern times. Albanese's and Neudecker's works bring a viewer deeper into his soul and invites personal reflection that brings about a cognitive reaction to a life-limit—a concept so abstract that it either brings an instant proemotion feeling of awe and wonder or antiemotion feeling of fear in that moment. In addition, Neudecker's work—small as it is yet complex—invite viewers to step into a world of an unknown void, potentially diving deep into phobia, emptiness or trauma.

On the other hand, Eliasson's *Project* brings a sense of social unity and cohesion brought about by a shared feeling of awe among the viewers inspired by a complex installation piece of an artificial sun, that also happens to exhibit technological and mechanical prowess. The *Weather Project* was a manifestation of the public's affection to spectacular feats and mechanics

of display. The sublime thus manifested itself in the minds of viewers through social cohesion of shared understanding. As David E. Nye noted in his book, the *American Technological Sublime*:

The sublime underlies this enthusiasm for technology. One of the most powerful human emotions, when experienced by large groups the sublime can weld society together. In moments of sublimity, human beings temporarily disregard divisions among elements of the community. The sublime taps into fundamental hopes and fears.<sup>116</sup>

Eliasson's *Project* was a technological spectacle that conveyed a combination of Kant's mathematical sublime through the borderless illusion of the Turbine Hall, and the dynamical sublime through the representation of the sun—a giant orb radiating light toward viewers thereby creating a powerful sun-drenched atmosphere shared collectively in a room full of people eager for a spiritual experience. The sophisticated staging of nature generated by technology has now repossessed the natural experience, which Paldam explains:

Apparently, the price paid for art's embracing of a physically discernible atmosphere is that the 'weather' now presented is tainted in various ways, if not, as in Eliasson's case, directly generated by, technology. The getting closer to the 'real' in art presupposes a flowing together of artificial and natural, and of art and technology.<sup>117</sup>

The experience however, albeit generated by technology, is considered "new" for viewers and can therefore manifest a spiritual encounter. As Nye pointed out, "in a physical world that is increasingly desacralized, the sublime represents a way to reinvest the landscape and the works of men with transcendent significance."<sup>118</sup> Representation of nature thus has now become a critical element in construing the sublime experience in art.

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<sup>116</sup> David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), xiii.

<sup>117</sup> Camilla Skovbjerg Paldam, and Jacob Wamberg, *Art, Technology and Nature: Renaissance to Postmodernity* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 18.

<sup>118</sup> Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, xiii.

The sublime is essentially a religious feeling evoked by objects that confront viewers with glimpses of death, eternity, fear, or bliss. It is clear that artificial manifestation of the sublime is also successful at construing and evoking the notion of the sublime as in nature or the natural environment. Impressive objects, both large and small, simple or complex can be used as the medium to the message: that the unrepresentable and unknowable exists, and that mortal man is on a threshold of existence. The language of expression may have shifted throughout centuries, yet the source of the sublime still remained within the viewer. These experiences are integral in the human psyche. We live in a world that is constantly in flux environmentally, economically, politically and ethically—which has left humanity more apprehensive. As the world is increasingly advancing in economy, technology, innovation and globalization—societies are still becoming more divided, polarized, and remain disconnected to spiritual and transcendent ideals. The state of humanity and the environment are both on a precipice here on earth. Certainty is an illusion. Man and nature could undergo complete annihilation at any time through fortuitous events, an impending disaster, catastrophe or destruction either through natural, social, or geopolitical causes. The world is thus inherently insecure, and it is evident that there is a human need for a spiritual high in whatsoever form it may take. Ultimately, this is a special time for contemporary artists to address. By representing the sublime in art, artists are able to capture the means to confront viewers of that gap—the unknowable of what could happen and what lies beyond—in human perception. By using art as a language to search and explore themes of the sublime, artists are able to bring about an experience of it: an awareness of the limits of one's own existence and the ultimate presence of the *unknowable* beyond the threshold of the mind. Thus, experiencing the sublime in any form it may take—natural or synthetic—is an essential

undertaking for man to understand that humanity is *not* limitless in ability and power, and that there are greater eternal notions that exist beyond human perception.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Matthew Albanese, *Wildfire*, 2016. Mixed media: Wood, moss, yellow glitter, clear garbage bags, cooked sugar, Scotch-Brite pot scrubbers, bottle brushes, clipping from a bush in bloom (white flowers) clear thread, sand, tile grout (coloring), wire, paper and alternating yellow, red and orange party bulbs.



Figure 2. Matthew Albanese, *Fighting Tides*, 2016. Mixed media: paraffin wax, cotton, crayons, water.



Figure 3. Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003. Semi-circular screen, mirrors, artificial mist, 200 mono-frequency lights. Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London.



Figure 4. Mariele Neudecker, *Over and Over, Again and Again*, 2004. Mixed media: water, salt, fiberglass, each tank: 48 x 48 x 47 cm, each plinth: 48 x 48 x 111 cm, overall 48 x 204 x 160 cm, edition of 3 (+1 AP). Tate Britain, London.

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