

MONET'S
VÉTHEUIL IN WINTER



OLAFUR ELIASSON
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A SPACE WITHOUT BEGINNING AND END

Olafur Eliasson

In 1989, I traveled to New York with the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. I clearly recall encountering Monet's water-lily paintings in the lobby at the Museum of Modern Art and being struck by how the three paintings of the triptych, installed contiguously at an angle, defied the orthogonal framework of the museum. As an art student, I found it truly puzzling. Here was a painter who had conceived his paintings as a panoramic display, and the museum had made the effort to meet the spatial demands of his artwork. This seemed oddly calming, deeply satisfying.

While working in his studio, Monet experimented with large-scale water-lily canvases, placed at an angle. What made him decide to transform these canvases from a two-dimensional plane to three-dimensional space in the first place?

An expansive example of his space-shaping paintings is found in the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, where eight curving canvases were installed according to Monet's specifications in 1927, shortly after his death. The paintings bend the gallery walls to create two all-enveloping, interconnected elliptical spaces. The artworks make the spaces they inhabit explicit; they pull us out of our everyday orthogonal frameworks.

As a viewer, you're enveloped by and immersed in the flickering of light and the colors of the gardens in Giverny and the sky above. No longer an I/eye, your body is pushed to move around the spaces; looking becomes embodied, a "sensorimotor activity." I borrow this term from Evan Thompson, a philosopher who asks, "How does one's lived body relate to the world, and how does it relate to itself?"¹ Walking through the Orangerie galleries in my

Olafur Eliasson
Colour experiment no. 109, 2020
Oil on canvas
diam. 44½ in. (113 cm)
Courtesy the artist;
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery,
New York / Los Angeles;
neugerriemschneider, Berlin



FROZEN SPLENDOR

Monet's *Vétheuil in Winter*

Susan Grace Galassi

I have pitched my tent on the banks of the Seine at Vétheuil, a ravishing place from which I should be able to extract some things that are not bad.

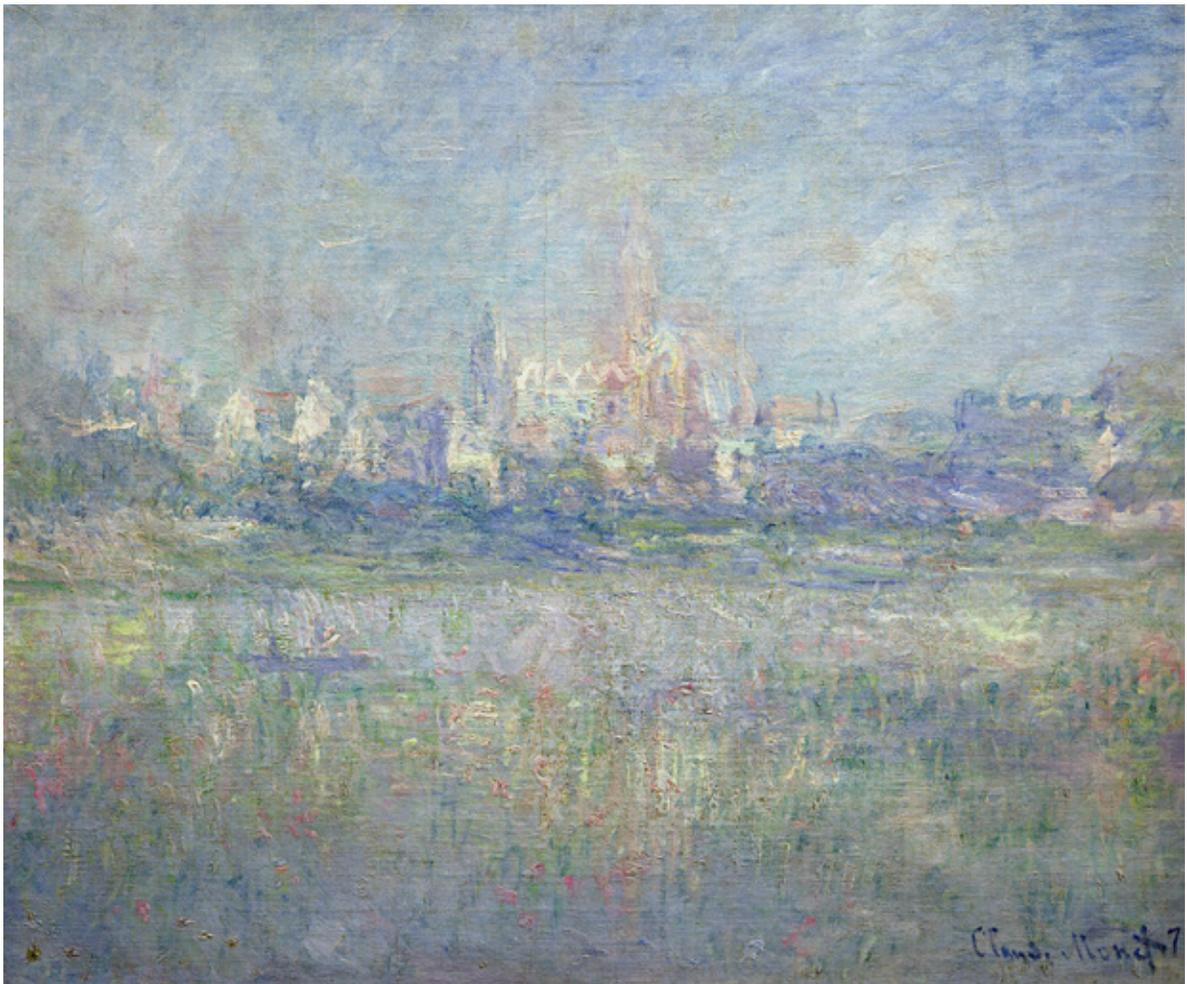
—Claude Monet, September 1, 1878

With these words, Claude Monet, then age thirty-eight and regarded as the head of the Impressionist school, announced to his friend Eugène Murer that he was leaving the French capital and moving to Vétheuil, a remote farming community in the department of Val-d'Oise (fig. 1). The position of Vétheuil—located approximately twenty-five miles northwest of the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil, Monet's home for the previous seven years—connected it with his past and future residences. From Vétheuil, the river continues downstream in its serpentine path, passing near Giverny, Monet's final home, and empties into the English Channel at Le Havre, where he grew up and embarked on his sixty-eight-year career. Monet's period in Vétheuil was relatively brief, from the summer of 1878 to the end of 1881. It was also filled with turmoil; during these years, he experienced financial challenges and personal loss, as well as paralyzing times of self-doubt. Even the climate contributed its share of hardship. Nonetheless, Monet produced approximately two hundred paintings of the area during his stay, making it one of his most productive periods.¹ Although less well known than his years in Argenteuil, a place regarded as the cradle of Impressionism, and his triumphant final four decades at Giverny, Monet's time in Vétheuil—a hyphen between them—was a critical period of reassessment and a starting point for a new direction in his art and life that carried him through to his

Fig. 11
Claude Monet
Vétheuil in the Fog, 1879
Oil on canvas
23 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 28 (60 × 71 cm)
Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris;
Gift of Eugène and Victorine
Donop de Monchy, 1940

Caillebotte borrowed key canvases that spanned the artist's career, including current Vétheuil work, giving Monet his first mini-retrospective. Yet, despite his friend's colossal effort, a deeply dejected Monet did not travel to Paris to view the exhibition, held in April.

The inexorable progression of Camille's illness and the imminence of her death were at the forefront of Monet's life during the spring and summer of 1879. Desperate for funds—and most likely also as a way to maintain emotional stability as Camille's life ebbed away—Monet continued to paint at a frenetic pace through the spring and early summer, until he could no longer



afford the necessary materials. He revisited established motifs in compositional variations, giving free rein to stylistic experimentation. In *Vétheuil in the Fog* (fig. 11), Monet positioned himself either on the water in his studio boat or on one of the mid-river islands. This version of the village looks back to the Frick canvas through its blue, green, and white palette, while the solidity of the architecture in the winter version, now shrouded in fog, merges with its ghostly reflection in the water below. Here, Monet pushes the image to the limits of visibility, depicting the village more as an alluring mirage than as a place of material reality.⁴¹

Lavacourt's prime vantage point overlooking Vétheuil and the sweep of the Seine drew the artist back in the summer, as Camille's life hung by a thin thread. Monet, taking a similar (or the same) viewpoint to that he had used in the Frick painting, created new versions, some in a naturalistic manner, such as *The Church at Vétheuil* (1879; Southampton City Art Gallery), painted from his studio boat, and others verging on the abstract.⁴²

Vétheuil in Summer (fig. 12) is the culmination of the summer versions of the village seen from across the river. Although perhaps not intentionally created as such, the Frick and Toronto paintings form a complementary pair.⁴³ (Within a year, they would come together in the collection of Georges de Bellio.⁴⁴) Made from the same point of view on canvases of almost the same dimensions in horizontal format, they represent the village in opposite seasons and are painted in different modes that demonstrate Monet's stylistic range. From the frozen silhouette of the village in the winter version, Monet moves inward to its fiery core. In the winter work, forms are solid and legible, if generalized, and reflections play a minimal role. In the summer version, architecture, land, water, and reflections are distinguishable but meld together in an exquisitely woven tapestry of short brushstrokes and bright, warm hues. The scholar John House has singled out this work as marking a shift in Monet's way of viewing subjects that continued to the end of his career, with the emphasis now more "on the act of seeing than the objects seen."⁴⁵ This stylistically significant work made in the summer before Camille's death may also reflect something deeper and more personal. If Monet had originally viewed Vétheuil as a sanctuary for his wife's recovery, it had metamorphosed into a place where her spirit would reside. This image of the dissolving village dominated by the church, in which material reality is absorbed into the enveloping light, seems to point to the imminence of her loss.



Fig. 21
Claude Monet
La Débâcle, 1880
Oil on canvas
23¾ in × 39¼ in. (60.3 × 99.9 cm)
University of Michigan Museum
of Art; Acquired through the
generosity of Russell B. Stearns
(LS&A, 1916) and his wife,
Andree B. Stearns, Dedham,
Massachusetts

As the series progressed, Monet left behind the geographic markers of the villages of Vétheuil and Lavacourt and signs of civilization, setting his scenes in pure nature—his private Arctic—though the views he painted were not far from home. In *La Débâcle* (fig. 21), made (or begun) from the Lavacourt side, Monet looked across the river with ice floes rippling out from the shores and drawn downstream in curved lines in a purely natural landscape. Yet, the lingering imprint of the composition of the Frick painting (and its variant) may be detected. The tall trees lining the shore across the river, with a sloping hill behind them, are grouped in a rough triangle, forming a natural version of the village of Vétheuil.

In *The Ice Floes* (fig. 22), Monet demonstrated his extraordinary sensitivity to the nuances of atmospheric light and color. In this work, the painter looked downstream on a small branch of the Seine between the Moisson islands. Begun on site in the warm glow of sunset, he depicted blue-edged, roughly textured floes suspended in transparent, orange-tinted water, holding the trees' reflections. They diminish in size and substance as they approach the horizon.



The painting was bought by the collector Charles Ephrussi and displayed at his house, where the young Marcel Proust saw it and commented in poetic language on the multi-layered reality and ambiguity that lie at the heart of these immersive views of nature and account for their mesmerizing quality:

See how everything shimmers, how everything becomes a mirage with this thaw; you can't make out if it is ice or sunlight, and all these pieces of ice break and carry along the reflections of the sky, and the trees are so bright that one cannot know if their redness results from autumn or their own nature, and one doesn't know where one is anymore, if it's a riverbed or a clearing in the wood.⁷⁹

The Ice Floes is the model for four additional works.⁸⁰ Among them is a larger painting, in a long horizontal format that gives it the feeling of a panorama (fig. 23). Executed in a more meticulous fashion than others in the series, it was made entirely in the studio a month or so later.⁸¹ This image is a summation of and farewell to the ice floe paintings. (Variations on previously completed

Fig. 22
Claude Monet
The Ice Floes, 1880
Oil on canvas
23⁷/₈ × 39¹/₈ in. (60.5 × 99.5 cm)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 23
Claude Monet
The Ice Floes, 1880
Oil on canvas
38¼ × 58¼ in. (97.2 × 148 cm)
Shelburne Museum; Gift of the
Electra Havemeyer Webb Fund,
Inc.

canvases, however, would continue to appear into the following year, long after the floes had passed downstream.)

The ice floe paintings are works of emotive power and poetic resonance. As aptly expressed by Jean-Dominique Rey, the series of ice breaking up shows “an explosion of form . . . the theme coincided exactly with the loosening-up effect [Monet] was seeking to achieve.” Nature’s breaking up of the ice signaled a corresponding breaking through for Monet.⁸² The obsessive manner in which he worked on them conveys their importance as a form of renewal and a symbol of moving on. The group of some twenty works made from different perspectives and on different-size canvases constitutes a significant step toward Monet’s later mode of painting in series. Unlike in the ice floe series, however, in later series Monet’s viewpoint remained fixed, with the theme continually undergoing change under varying atmospheric conditions. This approach would be the mainstay of his work of the 1880s and 1890s.

show at the gallery of the journal *La Vie moderne*, produced by a publishing house owned by Georges and Marguerite Charpentier.⁸⁹ During the run of the exhibition, Mme Charpentier purchased the work from Monet as a gift to her husband for the price of 1,500 francs. This was the first of several sales throughout the rest of the year that helped ease Monet's financial situation.⁹⁰ The painting would later be shown at the seventh Impressionist exhibition in 1882, where it garnered praise for its execution and depth of feeling. In a review, the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans noted, "Fortunately, Monet has had a turning point; it seems he has no longer decided to daub piles of paintings. He's . . . given us this time very beautiful and complete landscapes." He praised him as a "great landscapist, whose eye, now guided, sees with surprising fidelity all the effects of light," mentioning that his *Ice Floes* projects an intense melancholy.⁹¹

The novel subject of the ice floes had reinvigorated Monet, who had attempted to capture them before they disappeared. Yet, they never fully disappear. As has been frequently noted, they are the precursors to his water lilies, the dominant theme of his work from the late 1890s to the end of his life, as can be seen when comparing the Shelburne work with *Water Lilies* (fig. 25), one of many relevant examples. Connecting the ice floe series to the later water lilies, Joel Isaacson writes:

In these low-lying landscapes, the stretch of water extends across the horizontal canvas and recedes into depth as the floating "pads" of ice diminish in size. . . . Each floe measures in stately fashion the receding plane of the river. Consider the lower half of these canvases alone, and we find the basic structure of Monet's horizonless paintings of the water lily years.⁹²

Beginning in 1881, Durand-Ruel was able to support the Impressionist painters again. He purchased paintings from Monet at higher prices and presented his new work in exhibitions in his gallery.⁹³ In addition to working with Durand-Ruel, Monet also dealt with Georges Petit and exhibited his canvases in other venues as well. At the end of 1881, Alice left Ernest and moved with Monet and the eight children to Poissy, closer to Paris. They moved again in 1883 to the more distant Giverny in Normandy, on the river Epte, Monet's home until his death in 1926. (Alice would die in 1911.) Throughout the 1880s, Monet depicted the fields around Giverny and went on long painting campaigns to the coasts of Normandy and Brittany (1880–86),

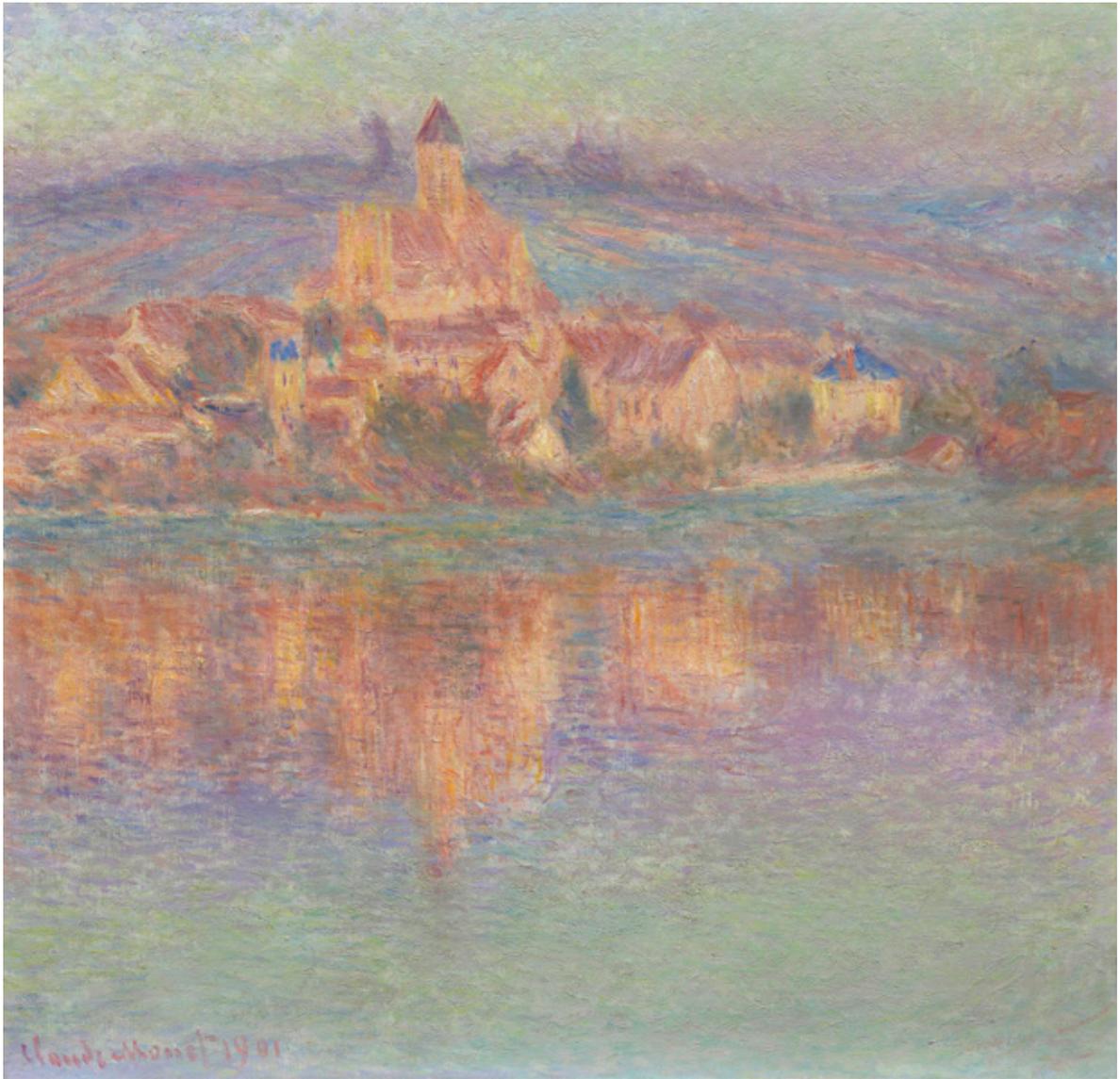


Fig. 27
Claude Monet
Vetheuil, 1901
Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (90 × 93 cm)
Art Institute of Chicago; Mr. and Mrs. Martin
A. Ryerson Collection

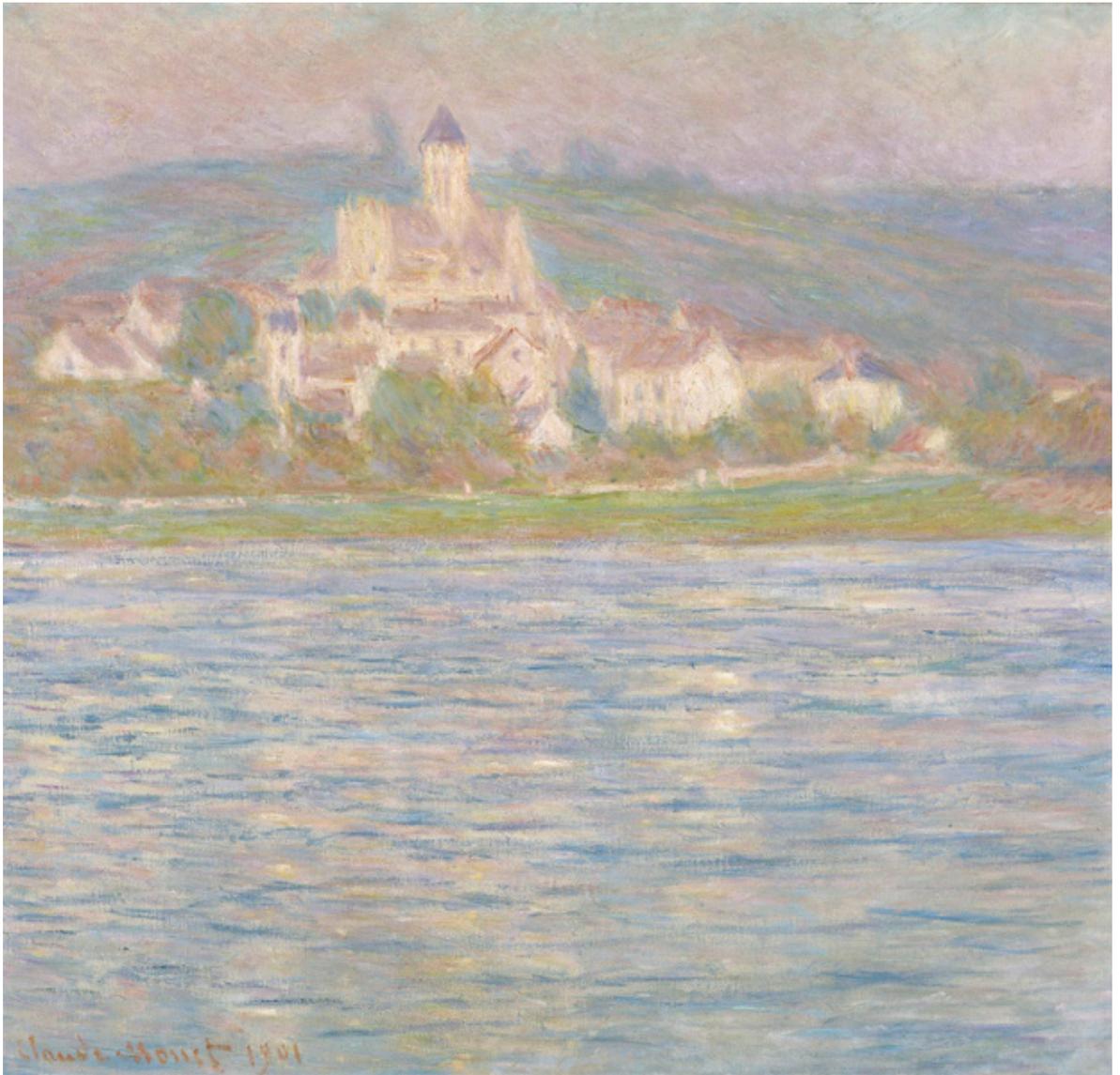


Fig. 28
Claude Monet
Vétheuil, Gray Effect, 1901
Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (90 × 93 cm)
Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille