



FONDATION **BEYELER**

LIFE  
OLAFUR ELIASSON  
APRIL – JULY 2021



# OLAFUR ELIASSON ON *LIFE* AT THE FONDATION BEYELER

In recent years, I have increasingly grown interested in efforts to consider life not from a human-centric perspective but from a broad, biocentric perspective. I've found myself turning nouns into verbs – when I go through my exhibition, I try *to tree*, for instance – in order to become aware of perspectives that go beyond what we humans can properly imagine.

Life for humans, like all mammals, depends on inhaling and exhaling, on oxygen. Following the anthropologists Natasha Myers and Timothy Choy, I'd say that life is also about *con*-spiring – playing on the origin of the word ('to breathe with') as well as the dictionary definition. We conspire with the tree, with others, and with the planet.



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Olafur Eliasson  
*Life*, 2021 (Detail)  
Photo: Pati Grabowicz  
Courtesy of the artist;  
neugerriemschneider, Berlin;  
Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New  
York / Los Angeles  
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When we recognise that our lives are inextricably entangled with our surroundings and with structures and systems that extend far beyond our local context, we learn, I believe, that we are all vulnerable and not fully in control. We act and interact in situations defined by uncertainty and unclear outcomes.

In the words of anthropologist Anna L. Tsing: *Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious – even when, for the moment, our pockets are lined.*



*Life*, my artwork, and the Fondation Beyeler are entangled with the surrounding park, the urban landscape, and the planet, and they come to life through everything and everyone that meet up in it.

Ever since I began practising as an artist in the early 1990s, I have been interested in perception and in the cognitive and cultural conditions that shape it. *Life* comes to life through your active encounter with it, through your perception. I've chosen not to offer a didactic or explanatory text to accompany the artwork, as this might shape visitors' perception and understanding of the exhibition. It's important to me not to share a finite perspective on *Life*. Some of my thoughts on making the artwork and its continued life, as well as my sources of inspiration for the work, can be found here. At the same time, I welcome what visitors bring with them to the artwork, their expectations and memories, thoughts and emotions.

*Life* presents a model for a future landscape. It is hospitable. When Sam Keller, the Director of the Fondation Beyeler, and I first discussed the exhibition a couple of years ago, I thought, *Why don't we invite everyone to the show? Let's invite the planet – plants and various species*. Beyond just opening a door, I decided to remove the structural boundaries that keep the outside out of the institution, and I am grateful to the Fondation Beyeler and to the architect Renzo Piano, who built the museum, for trusting me to carefully – and caringly – have the glass façade removed from the building.

*This artwork is a collective experiment. It challenges our conventions of art, nature, institution and life and attempts to dissolve their boundaries. Plants, animals, humans and microorganisms live together in this work. Both the time of day and the weather influence the development and perception of this exhibition.*

SAM KELLER, DIRECTOR OF THE FONDATION BEYELER



Together with the museum, I am giving up control over the artwork, so to speak, handing it over to human and non-human visitors, to plants, microorganisms, the weather, the climate – many of these elements that museums usually work very hard to keep out. Instead, we are trying to welcome everyone and everything in.



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Olafur Eliasson

*Life*, 2021

Photo: Mark Niedermann

Courtesy of the artist;

neugerriemschneider,

Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar

Gallery, New York / Los

Angeles

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*Planetary life survived at least three billion years before humanity. . . . We need honesty. We need to be freed from our species-specific arrogance. No evidence exists that we are chosen, the unique species for which all the others were made. Nor are we the most important one because we are so numerous, powerful, and dangerous. Our tenacious illusion of special dispensation belies our true status as upright mammalian weeds.*

LYNN MARGULIS, BIOLOGIST



*Where are the boundaries that make up a single life? We carry about two pounds worth of bacteria in our bodies. We are like mobile caravans carrying all these other species with us and they tell us something about our histories, about where we have been, all the bacteria we have picked up and our connection to others; who we have been in contact with. We are never alone.*

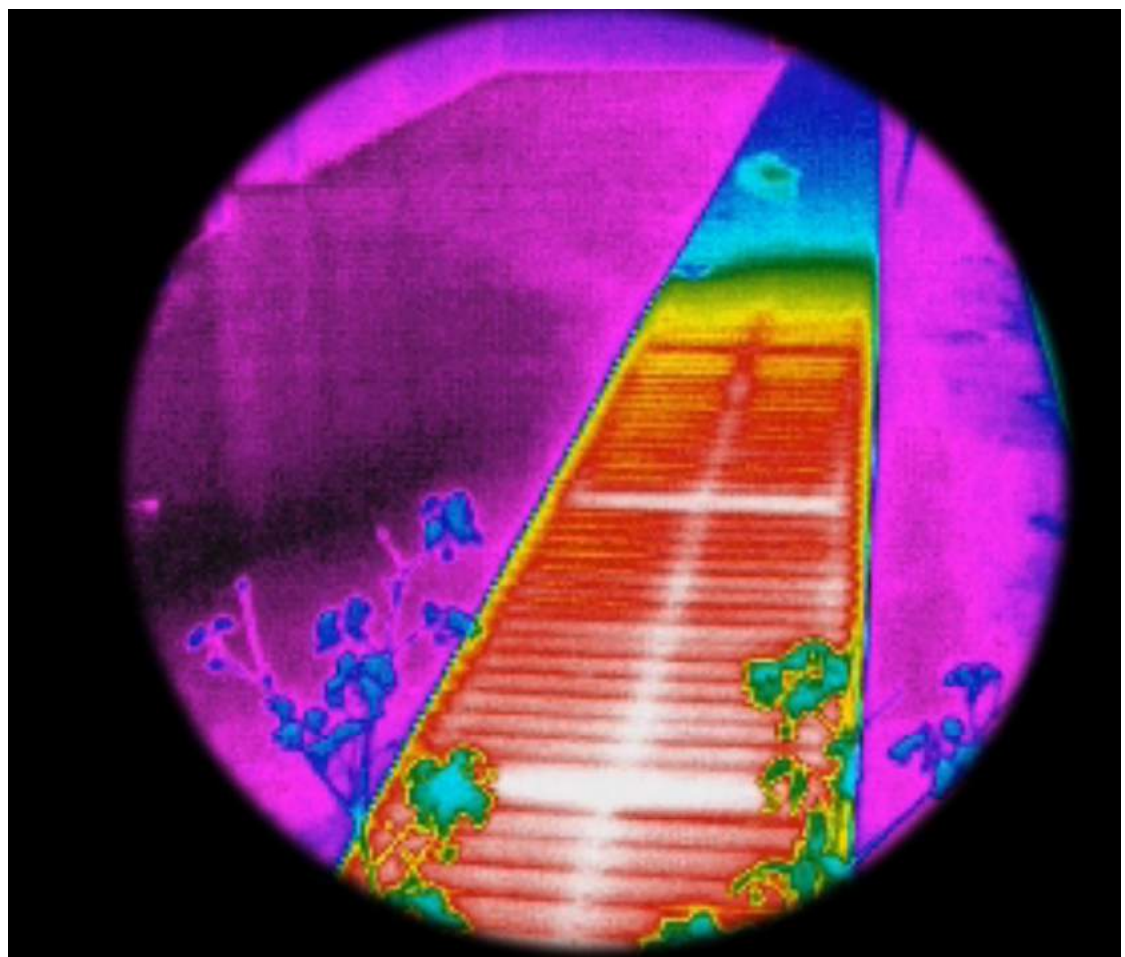
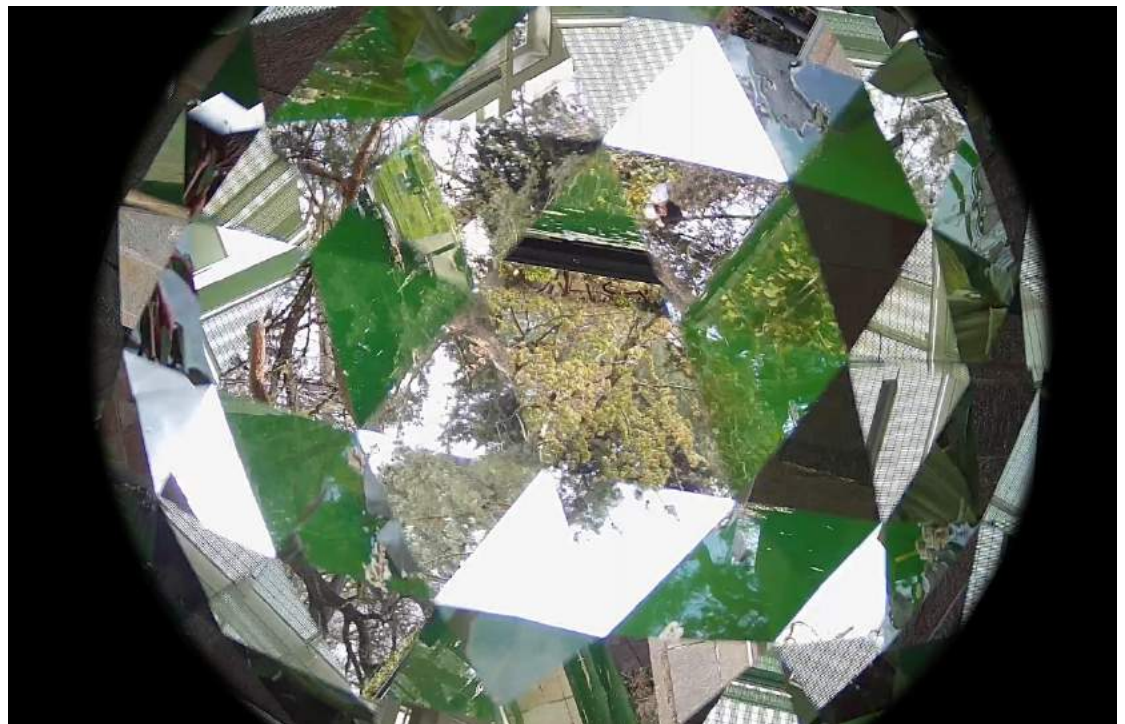
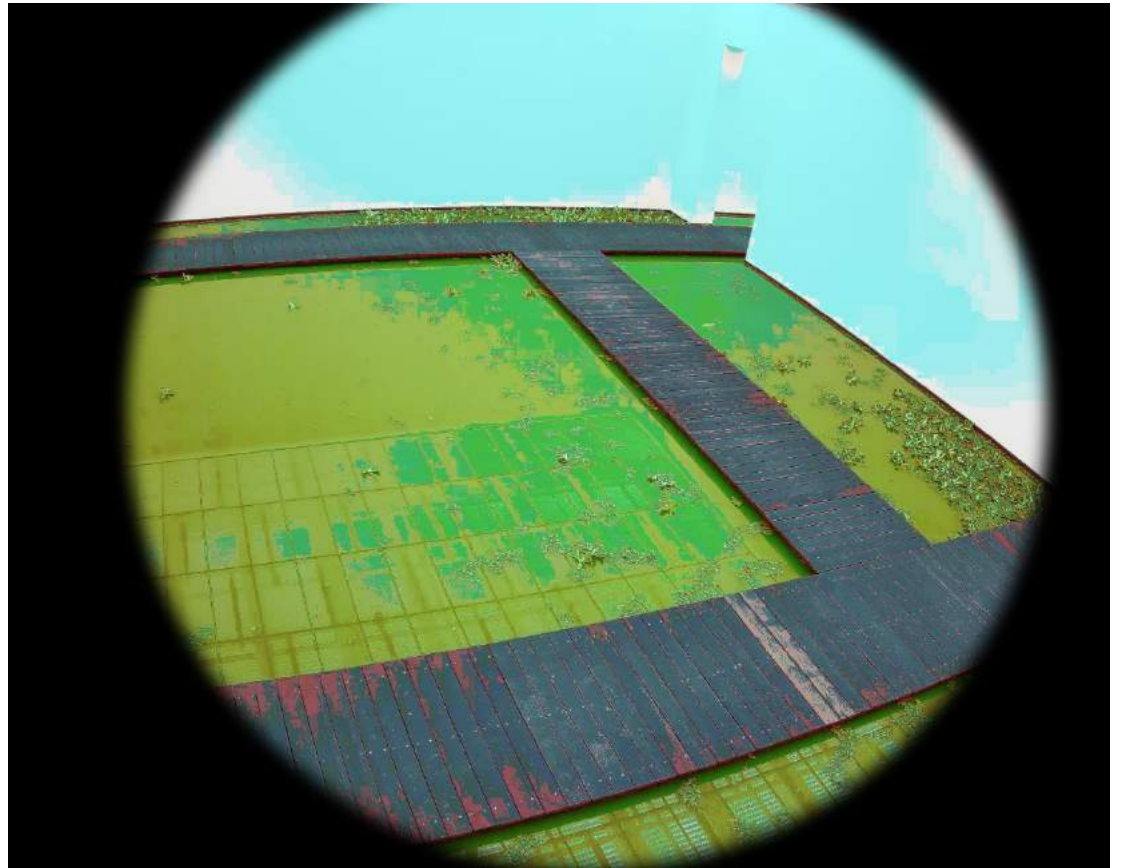
PIREENI SUNDARALINGAM, COGNITIVE SCIENTIST AND POET

I'm interested in how we put our senses to use, in how we use our awareness. And what happens when we go numb? My good friend, the cognitive scientist and poet Pireeni Sundaralingam has done research into how digital environments are often constructed as attention capture systems that build up neurological stress and threat-based behavioural patterns. She argues that rich sensory environments and digital or physical spaces that host uncertainty, as opposed to threat, have a positive impact in terms of brain development on growth, creativity, innovation, and resilience. I hope that *Life* encourages visitors to experience themselves within an expanded – open, uncertain – landscape, as composite beings, caught up in larger, unruly ecologies.

*Life* offers human visitors the opportunity to activate their full sensorium. Through the smells of the plants and water, the sounds of the surroundings, the moisture in the air, visitors are always invited to use more than vision alone to explore the artwork. It invites 'panoramic awareness' within the landscape. It suggests that what is behind you, on either side of you, or above you is as important as what lies in front and ahead of you.

I've recently gotten to know the anthropologist and dancer Natasha Myers, who invites us to – what she calls – 'vegetalise' our senses in order to grasp the potential of plant–people relations. In an essay Myers asks: *What do plants want? What do plants know? What can a plant do? We do not yet know. But you could reach toward them with the openness of not knowing, and forgetting what you thought counts as knowledge.*






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Olafur Eliasson  
*Life*, 2021 (Livestream stills)  
 Photo: Studio Olafur Eliasson  
 Courtesy of the artist;  
 neugerriemschneider, Berlin;  
 Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New  
 York / Los Angeles  
 © 2021 Olafur Eliasson

*The use of optical filters created  
 by Eliasson mimic the  
 perceptual apparatuses of other  
 species, to allude to non-human  
 perspectives  
 of the exhibition and its  
 surroundings.*



While *Life* may give the impression that nature has taken over the Fondation Beyeler, it simultaneously also presents a profoundly sculpted experience. The bright green water, which takes up most of the space, is infused with uranine, a nontoxic dye used to study water flow. I've used it to make the presence of the water explicit.

The plants in *Life* – dwarf water lilies, shellflowers, water ferns, and more – were carefully selected by my good friend, the landscape architect Günther Vogt. Günther and I have collaborated on several artworks in the past that explored the perforated lines between nature and culture, acknowledging that we humans are part of larger systems.

*The exhibition now detaches itself from the concept of the natural. And this is precisely the approach that makes it possible to discuss such topics in the museum at all. It is no longer about something preconditioned – be it a picture, be it an installation – but rather about opening up something new. Consequently, talking about it also means going outside and bringing this outside into the museum. I find the artificial exaggeration of the so-called green quite exciting in the context of the museum. Ultimately, it's about the idea of the cultural production of landscape – because landscape is always a cultural production.*

GÜNTHER VOGT, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

I see *Life* as a naturalcultural landscape. *Natureculture* is a term coined by feminist, scientist, and author Donna Haraway, and I think we're at a point where we're finally realising that culture and nature are inseparable – in fact, they always were. In my part of the world, we used to think that we humans were exceptional – success was achieved when we placed ourselves above nature, in a role of power, using and shaping Earth to our liking. Now we have to work through the fact that we're a little less exceptional than we thought. We must make space for others.



I'd like to suggest that our sense of time passing is also part of the artwork. I think there's some potential in 'unlocking time' from standardised units of measurement, to understand the time it takes to encounter the artwork and be fully enmeshed in it as a lived, felt sense of time, inseparable from one's experience.

Neurobiologist Anna Wirz-Justice has done incredible research into the science of biological time, of our daily rhythms – the so-called circadian rhythms – and into how these rhythms govern human behaviour and physiology. But they also impact most other living organisms – from the smallest bacteria, fungi, and plants to flies and fish and mammals – as they have all internalised these external, geophysical rhythms and have a remarkably similar set of 'clock genes' that generate an internal cycle of about twenty-four hours.

*Life* is not bound by a human sense of time; it does not have fixed opening or closing dates. Instead, it slowly started emerging in April and will fade away in July. In this way, the construction and deconstruction of *Life* become integral parts of the artwork and can be observed by visitors from the park surrounding the Fondation Beyeler.

*I am obsessed, I have to confess, by the visual contrast between two ways of considering the Earth. The first is as a Globe – the famous Blue Planet viewed from out in space. In the second view the Earth is totally different; it is tiny, fragile and far from equilibrium. . . . It resembles a pellicle, a varnish, a skin that is always considered not from the outside as a globe, but from the inside as a highly controversial, multilayered, and disputed set of intermingling entities.*

BRUNO LATOUR, PHILOSOPHER



*Life* is in continuous transformation. Humans and non-humans alike can experience these changes at any time of day or night, for there are no opening or closing hours for the exhibition. Even if no human visitors are in the space, other beings – insects, bats, or birds, for instance – can fly through or take up temporary abode within it. At night, *Life* glows – you can go see for yourself.



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Olafur Eliasson  
*Life*, 2021  
Photo: Mark Niedermann  
Courtesy of the artist;  
neugerriemschneider,  
Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar  
Gallery, New York / Los  
Angeles  
© 2021 Olafur Eliasson

I've always felt that art has agency – not as an intrinsic value or essential core but as being-in-and-with-the-world – just like the visitor has agency in meeting up with the artwork. They're both situated somewhere, in a world – the agencies and trajectories of the artwork and of the visitor are part of larger networks. The question, then, is what happens in that meeting up of artwork, visitor, and the world when their journeys intertwine? Does the artwork move the visitor? Do visitors move the artwork into their 'now' – the moment and world in which the encounter takes place? And what if the visitor is a non-human being – a butterfly, for instance, taking a detour from its journey through the Beyeler park? I think all can potentially move and be moved.



I invite you to explore the exhibition for yourself. If you are unable to travel to the Fondation Beyeler in person, you can visit [www.olafureliasson.net/life](http://www.olafureliasson.net/life) at any time of day or night to see the exhibition live from alternating human and non-human perspectives.

The microsite that accompanies the exhibition, [www.life.fondationbeyeler.ch](http://www.life.fondationbeyeler.ch), collects a growing resource of materials that have inspired the exhibition, including a series of conversations I had with Dr. Prof. Em. Anna Wirz-Justice, Prof. Günther Vogt, Sam Keller and Pireeni Sundaralingam.

I am indebted to them for sharing their knowledge with me in these conversations, which were critical in shaping this artwork. As I consider their perspectives to be fascinating and important, I have asked them to be available for interviews about their own work, and they have kindly agreed to do so. To arrange to speak to them, please write to Dorothee Dines at [presse@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:presse@fondationbeyeler.ch).

*Olafur Eliasson*



# PRESS INFORMATION

Press images are available at [www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/media/press-images](http://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en/media/press-images).

For further information, or to enquire about arranging an interview please contact Dorothee Dines, Jan Sollberger and Sandra Pfeiffer at [presse@fondationbeyeler.ch](mailto:presse@fondationbeyeler.ch) or on +41 (0)61 645 97 21.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

For the latest updates on the exhibition, visit [life.fondationbeyeler.ch](http://life.fondationbeyeler.ch), find us on Facebook at [facebook.com/fondationbeyeler](https://facebook.com/fondationbeyeler), or follow @studiolafureliasson and @fondationbeyeler on Instagram.

With thanks to the teams at Studio Olafur Eliasson and at the Fondation Beyeler; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles; Michael Manthey Licht- und Elektrotechnik; Hydroplant AG

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

## ABOUT OLAFUR ELIASSON

Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) works with sculpture, painting, photography, film, installation, and digital media. His art is driven by his interests in perception, movement, embodied experience, and feelings of self and community. Not limited to the confines of the museum and gallery, his practice engages the public through architectural projects, interventions in civic space, arts education, policy-making, and climate action. Eliasson is internationally renowned for installations that challenge the way we perceive and co-create our environments. For *Green river*, carried out in various cities between 1998 and 2001, Eliasson turned six rivers a vivid green using the water-soluble dye uranine. *The mediated motion*, 2001, at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz in Austria, filled a sequence of spaces with natural materials, such as water, fog, earth, wood, fungi, and duckweed. *The weather project*, a glowing indoor sun shrouded in mist, occupied Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in London in 2003, where it was seen by two million visitors. In 2008 Eliasson constructed four expansive artificial waterfalls along the Manhattan and Brooklyn shorelines for *The New York City Waterfalls*. In 2014, *Riverbed* filled an entire wing of Denmark's Louisiana Museum of Modern Art with stones and water, emulating a river in a rocky landscape. A second iteration of *Riverbed* was installed in 2019 at Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. For *Ice Watch*, Eliasson brought large blocks of free-floating glacial ice to the city centres of Copenhagen (2014); Paris (2015, on the occasion of the COP21 Climate Conference); and London (2018). Passers-by could touch fragments of the Greenlandic glacial ice and witness its fragility as it disappeared before them. Eliasson was named UNDP Goodwill Ambassador for climate action and the sustainable development goals in 2019. On the occasion of the 2020 German Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Eliasson created *Earth Speakr* together with children around the world and support from the German Federal Foreign Office; the global artwork invites kids to speak up for the planet.

Since the mid-1990s, Eliasson has realised numerous major exhibitions around the world. Recent exhibitions include *In real life*, a wide-ranging survey exhibition of Eliasson's artistic practice over the past twenty-five years, opened at Tate Modern, in London, and travelled to Guggenheim Bilbao in 2020. *Olafur Eliasson: Symbiotic seeing* opened at Kunsthhaus Zürich in January 2020, and *Sometimes the river is the bridge* was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo in spring 2020.

Located in Berlin, Studio Olafur Eliasson comprises a large team of craftsmen, architects, archivists, researchers, administrators, cooks, art historians, and specialised technicians. [www.olafureliasson.net](http://www.olafureliasson.net)

## ABOUT FONDATION BEYELER

The Fondation Beyeler is a museum of modern and contemporary art in Riehen/Basel. The museum building by Renzo Piano is located in an idyllic park and surrounded by historic houses and old trees. It houses an outstanding art collection, comprising over 400 works of classical modern and contemporary art. The Fondation Beyeler is the most visited art museum in Switzerland.



## ABOUT GÜNTHER VOGT

Günther Vogt is a landscape architect with a passion for and deep knowledge of plants and literature. VOGT Landschaftsarchitekten with branches in Zurich, London, Berlin and Paris achieved international recognition with projects such as the Tate Modern in London, the Allianz Arena in Munich, or the Masoala Rainforest Hall at the Zurich Zoo. Its work is characterized by the dialogue established between the various disciplines and its close cooperation with artists.

His latest book *Mutation and Morphosis* (2020) or the award-winning publication *Distance & Engagement* (Günther Vogt and Alice Foxley, 2010) show VOGT's impressive analytical and knowledge-based design translated into models. Since 2005, Günther Vogt has been pursuing a combination of teaching, practice, and research with his chair at the Institute of Landscape Architecture at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich and the VOGT Case Studio in Zurich – a platform for research and exhibition. As a passionate collector and keen traveler, he is looking for ways to read, interpret, and describe landscapes, and finding answers to questions about future forms of urban coexistence.

Vogt and Eliasson have collaborated on several of Eliasson's artworks including [The mediated motion, 2001](#), [Your glacial expectations, 2012](#), and [Yellow forest, 2017](#).

## ABOUT DR. PROF. EM. ANNA WIRZ-JUSTICE

Dr. Prof. Em. Anna Wirz-Justice is Professor Emerita at the Centre for Chronobiology at the University of Basel's Psychiatric Hospital and has conducted pioneering research into light therapy and the chronobiology of depressive illness. Eliasson met Wirz-Justice in 2016 at the Daylight Award ceremony at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. That same year, Wirz-Justice invited Eliasson to become a founding member of the Daylight Academy. The academy connects scientists, architects and other professionals, and promotes interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thinking about daylight.

## ABOUT PIREENI SUNDARALINGAM

Pireeni Sundaralingam is a cognitive scientist and poet. Educated at Oxford, cognitive scientist Pireeni Sundaralingam has held research posts at the Department of Brain Sciences at MIT and UCLA. She is a Fellow at the pioneering science-art-and-human perception museum, the Exploratorium, and a Salzburg Global Fellow in Creativity and Neuroscience. As a behavior change scientist, she recently served as science advisor to the Irish government's Minister of Art & Heritage, served in the creation of UNLive, the Museum of the United Nations and has advised groups ranging from health & well-being software start-ups to international climate change initiatives to Wall Street's Financial Industry Regulatory Authority. Pireeni currently leads research for Silicon Valley's Center for Humane Technology and helped advise on "The Social Dilemma", the internationally acclaimed documentary about social media; she is currently writing a book on how social media hijacks the brain, impacts children's development, and disrupts democracy, and how we can take action to have a more productive and sustainable relationship with digital technology.