An Exchange of Thoughts

Olafur Eliasson OE
in conversation with
Mirjam Varadinis MV

MV ‘I want to have an impact’, is one of your quotes that struck me. It makes clear how important it is for you to move something – both in the real world and in the minds of the spectators. What impact do you want to achieve? And how can art effect such an impact?

OE I’ve always felt that art has agency, just like the visitor has agency in meeting up with the artwork. They’re both situated in a place, of course, in a world – the agencies of the work and of the viewer are part of larger networks. The question then is what happens in that meeting up of work, visitor, and the world. Does the artwork move the viewer? Do viewers move the artwork into their ‘now’ – the moment and world in which the encounter takes place? I think all three are potentially movers and they can also be moved.

If we look at impact in a broader perspective, art has always been in dialogue with the time period in which it is made, and while art and artists have sometimes been viewed as outsiders, I feel there has been a change in perception in the last decade. I’m actually being invited – as an artist – to discuss solutions to local and global challenges with policymakers, politicians, businesses, NGOs and activists. And I believe that my art is robust enough not to be ‘functionalised’, taken over by the interests of the other parties in these conversations.

One of the reasons that art and culture are being taken more seriously is probably that many feel the need to imagine other scenarios, other futures. And we do so in an ‘embodied’ way. I think that art can articulate and give body to some of the topics that the UN, for instance, can ‘only’ address in terms of data and graphs.

MV Climate change and migration are two of the most pressing issues of our times. Both play a vital role in your work in recent years. You address those issues not only from an analytical point of view but instead create immersive installations that involve all our senses. What role does the emotional aspect play in terms of perception?

OE This immersiveness is what I call art’s embodied approach. When it comes to climate action, we know that it requires more than simply giving people the relevant data. The language used to communicate the data matters. Your cultural background matters, too. And we know, as you say, that emotions matter, but if there are too many, if there’s an overload of worries, for instance, then you fall into apathy. Elke Weber, a friend of mine who is an expert in behavioural science and has studied the psychology of decision making, talks about having a ‘finite pool of worry’, meaning that we can only be concerned about a certain number of issues so we have to pick those issues carefully (and some of the issues pick us, of course – we just inevitably become caught up in them).

I strongly believe in the importance of having physical, embodied experiences. Feeling the melting ice in *Ice Watch,* 2014, conveys a different story from the one we get through simply reading about glacier ice melting. It matters to actually engage with our senses.

Needless to say, we have to make decisions for the longer term – and not just focus on short-term fixes that get politicians re-elected. To make this happen, I really believe that we need hope. This is what will enable us to live with the climate crisis. It’s what keeps us from despair, from becoming traumatised. If our vision of the future doesn’t have an element of hope, we are less likely to do something. By working with the senses, art works against apathy.

MV We live in the so-called ‘Anthropocene’[1], a geological era defined by the impact of human beings on our planet, which led to the dramatic climate change we are experiencing

now. This insight into the harmful effects of human beings on nature and earth is challenging traditional systems of knowledge and hierarchy of species, and asks for new models of how we can live together – amongst humans but also non-human agents in the world. These discussions are being addressed in the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich. How do you translate those ideas into art?

OE When it comes to shaping the thought-space of an exhibition, I look for inspiration in philosophy and in reading, for instance, and I rely on my studio team and trusted friends for impulses. Actually, even before I started working on the show in Zurich, the development team at my studio had been looking into microorganisms, at the shapes of plankton and more, as a separate strand of research that might lead to new artworks. Once I have found something that grabs me, I bring these findings into contact with the world as I experience it. I try to detect any new visual and spatial territory that emerges.

I grew up, intellectually, on Merleau-Ponty, and phenomenology was a rich source of exploration for me. At the time, I was very occupied by questions of the self and of subjectivity, but in recent years I've come to recognise that these concerns reflected a predominantly Western perspective and have begun thinking more and more in terms of systems. As a result, a porous notion of the self has become increasingly relevant to me. In light of the climate emergency, it's become clear that focusing on human beings alone will not give us the expanded sense of empathy for the planet and for non-human animals that is needed for truly ambitious climate action.

MV An interesting figure that has revolutionised the thinking on coexistence is Lynn Margulis (1938–2011), an American biologist and evolution theorist who offers an alternative to Darwin's theory. In her book *The Symbiotic Planet* from 1998 she claims that symbiosis is as potent a force as competition in the evolution of life. This idea plays an important role for the new works that you have conceived for the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich. How did you come across Lynn Margulis and what inspired you in her work?

OE I've encountered the work of Margulis a few times, especially through Caroline Jones[2], a brilliant art historian and thinker whom I've known for a really long time. Although Margulis's work was in microbiology and evolution, her ideas resonate with me because I have been working with coexistence, togetherness and collaboration-instead-of-competition for many years. She was a unique figure in the scientific landscape, a true revolutionary. I am fascinated both by her tenacity and her radical thinking. Her ideas on symbiosis have immense consequences for our notions of self and subjecthood. Think of the role played by our microbiome in determining who we are – the sum of all the bacteria, fungi, archaea, and viruses inside us is estimated to make up more than half of the substance of our body. This means that we are as much non-human as we are human.

MV The discourse about 'multispecies'[3] or 'interspecies relations'[4] has recently gained a lot of attention. In this book we have compiled a series of texts and excerpts by some of the most important thinkers in this field that have played an important role in your artistic practice in recent years.

1 See glossary → *Anthropocene.*
2 See Caroline Jones, *We Symbionts,* pp. 98–103.
3 See glossary → *Multispecies.*
4 See glossary → *Interspecies relations.*

In your opinion, what consequences do these theories have for the relationship between people, and how can we help them be heard at legislative level?

OE A number of people – like Donna Haraway, the eco-feminist and theorist of so-called post-humanism, and the philosopher Timothy Morton – have been calling for multispecies environmental justice, taking into account the interests of non-humans. I don't think that this precludes more people-centred approaches to climate justice, as there are many stories that must be told. The former prime minister of Ireland, Mary Robinson, for instance, advocates for climate action in her book *Climate Justice* by offering vivid anecdotes of how people are coping with climate change – often women, as it happens, showing great resilience. I think this is a strong approach because it appeals to our sense of empathy for our fellow human beings; we can relate, and being able to relate is a first step towards action.

But the idea of multispecies justice is fascinating and it asks a lot of us: to reconsider our identity as humans and to see ourselves as entangled in vast networks, with no clear hierarchy, no human hegemony. Haraway talks about inventing other sorts of 'we', other sorts of 'selves'. It is a bit of a leap to embrace a multispecies approach, advocating for solidarity with non-human animals, as Tim writes, but I believe in this type of expansion of the fields of agency and identity. It must have significant consequences for how we live our lives.

It's also fascinating to see the legislative measures being taken these days as part of the rights of nature movement. About 20 countries have so far put forward legislation to make nature – or parts of nature – into entities with legal rights, meaning that people can go to court on their behalf. The Wanganui River in New Zealand, for instance, has been granted the same legal rights as a human being.

MV You mentioned that reading, philosophy and impulses from your studio or friends may inspire you to create new works. Is there anything else that serves you as a source of inspiration?

OE Inspiration can come from most anything. I recently learned about ClientEarth, an NGO of lawyers based in London doing truly inspiring work on behalf of the Earth. They sued the British Government, for instance, for not implementing EU law about clean air. But inspiration can also come from something as simple as an online clip of the vortex-like air turbulence that makes a dandelion fly – it's so beautiful. Or from literature, where there's a turn towards nature and climate action in both poetry and specialist books: there's the work of Danish poet Liv Sejrbo Lidegaard, for instance, who poignantly writes about nature, urban spaces, and notions of 'we'; and Jonathan Safran Foer's recent book *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* – to name but a few. A good old-fashioned hike in Iceland is always inspiring, of course. Then I can study the colours of the Arctic lichen.

MV *Symbiotic seeing,* 2020, the main new installation in the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich, is linked to Margulis's idea of symbiosis and refers back to the so-called 'Urschleim', the primordial matter at the bottom of the ocean where evolution of life somehow started. But in your work, what looks organic is actually produced by highly technological equipment. The fusion of nature and technology, or magical wonder and scientific experiment, is very much present in your work. What is it about this combination that interests you?

OE I'm really interested in 360-degree perspectives, in thinking in terms of systems – for instance in the relationship between our gut bacteria, our well-being, and the world around us. This is more important to me than primordial soup, although my team did look into that when we began developing the exhibition.

In *Symbiotic seeing* I project lasers onto oil-based fog. The combination of lasers and fog makes the micro-turbulent activity in the air visible; these miniature vortices and currents are created by, for instance, the body heat of a visitor standing right beneath the fog. I see the coming together of the different materials, the sounds, heat, and bodies in the artwork as a way of making explicit the construction of that shared space.

I try not to speak in terms of a nature-technology dichotomy – they are categories of the past. As I see it, the Anthropocene has introduced the necessity to see things in a more networked way. Human and non-human activities are one. I've come to realise that we have to navigate our 'now', not based on what the past taught us, but as seen from the future.

MV How can the ecological aspects that you address in your work be reconciled with the intense technological effort that is needed to produce the works, and your lifestyle as an artist with a global career?

OE Like many others, I feel the need to improve my climate footprint. I am working with my studio team to find ways to make sure that our values are reflected in practice. I think it is important that art and culture show leadership on this front, even though their footprint and reach is less significant than that of many other fields, such as food production and transport. And people expect a lot from the field of culture. With my team, I am in conversations with museums and institutions about finding sustainable means of transporting artworks, of switching to electricity coming from renewable energy sources, and more. Tate Modern for example, where my exhibition *In real life* was recently on view[5], announced after the exhibition opening that it was switching to a renewable tariff for its electricity. The studio team is also working on a manual for how we can make art with the lowest possible CO_2 emissions, which I hope to share and improve together with other artists' studios.

MV Spectators have an active role in your works. They are co-producing the work with their presence in the space and their way of experiencing it. You often define your art as being inclusive. What do you mean by this?

OE You can encounter my artworks from the perspective of someone with a solid art-historical background, or you can simply walk into the exhibition without knowing anything about my work – and still feel spoken to. So, yes, I do think a lot about inclusion. I've also had to learn that some works fall short of that. In my exhibition *In real life,* I showed an old work, *Your spiral view,* 2002, a long kaleidoscopic tunnel that you enter via two steps. It is not accessible to wheelchair users and that turned into a heated public discussion on social media, which proved its worth as a platform for raising serious issues. Had it been 'in the good old days', the visitor would simply have received a polite, apologetic letter from a museum representative. But the discussion was very effective and got me thinking about inclusion for future exhibitions. In this case, social media acted as a means for empowerment and public participation.

Inclusion is not simply a principle that an artwork or an exhibition displays – it requires an inclusive environment as well. A museum can be more inclusive or less so in its approach to its visitors. In my view, to be included is not only a case of 'feeling that you are part of' a situation – it is about being given the mandate to co-author, to co-constitute.

And to extend this thought to a planetary level: inclusive thinking requires expanding our awareness to embrace other species, plants, weather systems, ocean currents, glaciers, and so on. To do that, we have to unplug the power systems that support our privileged position as human beings.

MV The idea of 'awareness' is crucial to many of your works – awareness of a specific phenomenon, be it natural, social or political. But also self-awareness and awareness of the self in relation to others are crucial. It's about 'being a group and an individual' as you have once said. In times of 24-hour availability and digital loneliness, your works offer space for direct physical encounter. When you started as an artist, the Internet didn't really exist, nor did social media. What was the impact of the digital world on your work?

OE The landscape is definitely different today. My studio team and I actively work with social media because it allows us to connect with people who might not be able to visit an exhibition, buy a catalogue, or otherwise come across my work. That's a rather unique opportunity and it did not exist when I began working as an artist.

Nonetheless, to have people interact with my artworks using their phones as extensions of their bodies is a fact that I – having grown up without a smart phone – quite honestly find difficult to embrace entirely. To me it seems that people are less present, feel less in their bodies when they view art with a phone in their hand. But I am unsure. It's also a world with a different set of expectations and conditions when it comes to having experiences, and I'd like to stay open to that. I anyway think I have little choice. Resisting the prevalence of digital media is like asking water to flow upwards.

I do think there's an increased awareness of the potential of slowness and of contemplative experiences. Art and culture in various ways offer such slow spaces if you're willing to let go of the need to feel digitally connected right when you encounter the artwork. But perhaps you only realise this on your third visit to an exhibition, once you're done with the photographs, with the filming and the immediate online sharing.

MV A community for you is based on differences and you intend to address different kinds of people with your artwork. The trends in politics worldwide tend to go in the opposite direction and the 'different' and 'other' are more and more excluded. Is this something that gives you an incentive to take an even more political stance with your art?

OE There are definitely mechanisms of exclusion at play and the divisive right-wing discourse is incredibly depressing. On social media the tone can get quite blunt and aggressive. We experienced that with *Ice Watch* in London in 2018. Some people, rightly, questioned the carbon footprint of bringing blocks of glacier ice from Nuuk to London, but we did not see people listening to or engaging at all with our response. As discomforting as I find it, I still want to understand why people express themselves in this way. They must feel that they are otherwise not being listened to. I'm interested in techniques for de-escalating conflicts, for offering space for people to be heard. I like to think that in cultural spaces we can have complex conversations without shunning conflict and disagreements – and I really welcome the efforts of those institutions who actively engage with diverse crowds of visitors and more 'difficult' topics. A cultural institution can host a shared narrative with people of different opinions

5 Olafur Eliasson: *In real life,* Tate Modern, London, 11 July 2019 – 5 January 2020.

as long as they recognise the importance of being together in that environment. Marion Ackermann, the Director General of the Dresden State Art Collections, has done incredibly important work at the fourteen art institutions that she's in charge of. In the past five years, Dresden has seen the rise of the Pegida movement, a nationalist, far-right, anti-Islam, and anti-immigration movement which has been very vocal in public space, and Marion has actively addressed how museums can take a stance in this discussion by bringing art into the streets and outside the city. Although I don't see my work as responding to particular political movements or ideas, I would like to see it as offering discursive spaces like these.

MV What kind of environment do you need to be creative?

OE I get ideas on the go, when I'm moving from one environment to the next. And I love being in my studio in Berlin. On a late evening, it's very relaxing, as there are no urgent answers needed. During the day, it's more intense – lots of ideas to filter through, lots of people to talk to, an abundance of models and materials and propositions to shape. This generative coexistence of ideas, materials, and people is quite precious.

Generally, I find collaborative work inspiring. There's a lot of silo thinking these days – this often results in high-quality, specialised knowledge but offers few open doors for cross-pollination. I understand the logic behind this, but horizontal collaborations between different fields, different strands of social and natural sciences are necessary to redesign the systems in which we operate and live. That's why we have to nurture the relationships between the silos, the networks.

MV In your Berlin studio you have more than 100 people working with and for you. They come from all different kinds of backgrounds and fields. How important is the transdisciplinary exchange for your work? How do you work with these experts?

OE Work in my studio is process- and dialogue-based – a ping-pong of ideas and questions. I rely on people who know more than I do about specific things and disciplines because it gives me freedom to concentrate on the artistic content. The studio is a down-to-earth workspace – people come in the morning, work, have lunch together, and go off to be with their friends or families in the evening – and at the same time it's an incredible source of inspiration. It spans from minute detailing of a project to dreaming and I feel really comfortable in having all these modes of working and of thinking within the same space. It's a small system of coexistence.

MV Your works often recall scientific experimental set ups. In your studio you try to simulate new works in a 1:1 situation in order to better understand their spatial dimension and visual impact. Due to limited space, this is not always possible and therefore you often only see the finished work once it is installed in its destined place. How does it feel to see the final work for the first time?

OE It's true that I don't always get to test something one to one. For *Symbiotic seeing,* for instance, I've only been able to test a part of the work – my studio simply isn't big enough to construct it at full scale. We're good at thinking spatially, so it does work out, but of course there's an element of excitement and a little bit of trepidation just before an exhibition opens. And in the end, it's anyway about how the visitors interact with what I do. That behavioural element is always an unknown.

MV In an earlier interview you said that 'an exhibition has a texture, an atmosphere. It's like a small weather system.' How would you describe the atmosphere of the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich?

OE I do think of an exhibition and everything that it involves as a system, whether a weather system or not. But the truth is that the response to your question lies on the other side of the exhibition opening. I simply don't know yet.