

Obrist, Hans Ulrich. "Conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Hans Ulrich Obrist."
In *Olafur Eliasson: Chaque matin je me sens différent. Chaque soir je me sens le meme.*
Edited by Joseph Jacquet. Exhibition catalogue.
Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2002: 17-37.
Translation by John Tittensor

Conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist: We could start by talking about your *Green River* series, in which you completely changed the look of certain cities by colouring their rivers green. A good example was Stockholm, where you had a IASPIS (International Artist Studio Programme) residency. How did people in Stockholm react?

Olafur Eliasson: At the time I was working on a smaller project, but very quickly the idea of colouring downtown Stockholm became something I just had to do. I bought the pigment in Germany and came back through customs with a real feeling of suspense and excitement; after all, I had enough colorant with me to dye the whole centre of the city. This wasn't an official project; I had to work really fast, so I'd got the planning down pat together with the current and the turbulence in the river, and one Friday at half past one there I was on the bridge with Emile and a bag full of red powder and people starting to stare at us. I hesitated for a moment then emptied the bag out over the parapet and the wind whipped up this enormous red cloud. I could literally feel people in cars slowing down, the cars went all quiet. And there was this cloud, floating over the river like a layer of gas. When it came in contact with the water, all of a sudden the river turned green, it was like a shock wave. There was a crowded bus ten metres away and everybody was staring at the water. I told Emile we should maybe move on, as if everything was perfectly normal, then I carefully put the bag in a trashcan, as if colouring the centre of Stockholm was the kind of thing I did every day. I went down to IASPIS and when I came out again my heart started jumping up and down like mad: the whole length of the river was completely green and all these people had stopped to look at it. Next day it was all over the front page of the papers: "The river turned green". The colorant was absolutely harmless and there was no pollution whatsoever.

HUO: So the idea was to make the city visible for its inhabitants, who no longer take any notice of the way it works or what's special about it. What you did was aimed at challenging their perception of their environment as something changeless and reassuring.

OE: Right. I wanted to get a fix on how the river is perceived in the city. Is it something dynamic or static? Something real or just a representation? I wanted to make it present again, get people to notice its movement and turbulence. For a few minutes there it was "hyperreal". In some respects the history of cities is the history of how they're represented and most of the time this is done by accentuating the classical, monumental structures that suggest power. The way we experience public spaces is more to do with the way representation and iconography influence our senses and our habits of seeing. A lot of people see urban space as an external image they have no connection with, not even physically.

HUO: Was there an element of risk in this project, or was it totally planned, right down to the reactions it was going to generate?

OE: You can never be absolutely sure how things are going to turn out. If it had rained, for instance, the level of the river would have been much higher. I was also

scared that when the day came the current would be wrong or maybe there would be no current at all. There was no way of knowing how the passers-by were going to react, or maybe the City was going to put barriers up along the river, you never know. But I'd learnt from experience that people's reactions are minimal; the city is more a mental image than a place for interaction and commitment.

HUO: You were saying that the press coverage made no mention of an art project. Is the anonymity of an event important to you?

OE: In this particular case, yes, because it happened in a public place. Earlier, in Canada, I'd created an outside work (*Proposal for a Park*, 1997) using chalk on the footpath. So I'd altered the map of the city; but the organisers put the word out that it was art, so it didn't work. Being codified that way, the event became something formal and turned my chalk lines into paintings rather than some kind of modification of the urban layout. But in the case of *Green River* nobody knew it was me.

HUO: It could maybe have been seen as some kind of extraterrestrial phenomenon. I'm thinking of Orson Welles and that famous radio broadcast, when he convinced his listeners that flying saucers had landed in the United States, and as the rumour spread there was mass hysteria.

OE: That's what I should do! But unfortunately rumour is running out of steam in our cities these days. How could you launch a rumour on Potsdamerplatz in Berlin? People don't meet each other there any more, at six in the evening everyone goes home and the square is empty — socially speaking it's a dead end. In other cities there would be someone around at that hour, a rumour could start to circulate.

HUO: When did you start these unauthorised or anonymous operations outside the institutional contemporary art context?

OE: My work aims at public involvement. Exhibitions in institutional settings often run up against a kind of standardised way of looking — of thinking even. Working "on location" via improvised operations reflects an urge to formally dissolve the work in question and expose the "neutralising" capacity of institutions — an urge to reach a different audience. My first opportunity to do this kind of project was at the Johannesburg Biennale. I'd been invited to show a series of photos, but the moment I got there I wanted to challenge the institutional setting. I found a little rainwater reservoir and emptied it (*Erosion*, 1997) without the Biennale curators being in on the idea — at least not until the water started running through the city for more than a kilometre, like a real river. It was simple and poetic at the same time.

HUO: At the São Paulo Biennale a lot of visitors went skating on your installation (*The Very Large Dance Floor*, 1998), while the surrounding area was full of skateboarders. What kind of relationships did you imagine springing up on or around the work?

OE: The skating rink maybe separated people even more. You looked at the installation through a sheet of glass. For the modernists this eliminates the division between interior and exterior, but in fact it only accentuates it. I created the same installation at Nanterre in France, because of the utopian associations of the town planning there. At the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh most people looked at my column of steam through a window (*Your Natural Denudation Inverted*, 1999), which meant they didn't hear the noise it made and didn't feel the pressure in the steam pipes or the wind or the outside temperature. A window always works like a picture frame: like a picture of a picture of a picture. There are different levels of representation that stack up and we have to be aware of this. By following what our senses teach us about

our environment we can get our bearings easily, but you can't say that looking at steam through a window is the same thing as experiencing it; it's important to see yourself feeling or feel yourself seeing, to weigh up your experiences from a "third party" point of view – via a double perspective. That way you can maintain a feeling of presence at very deep figurative levels.

HUO: You've done a lot of work on issues relating to architecture and urbanism, with people like Cedric Price or Yona Friedman who are less concerned with spatial matters than with open-ended, ephemeral operations. I imagine your collaboration with certain architects is based on this common interest. For "Manifesta I" in Rotterdam, for example, you worked with Einar Thorsteinn (*By means of a sudden intuitive realization, show me your perception of presence*, 1996).

OE: Yes, I find Einar a great source of inspiration. He began with Otto Frei back in the 1960s, and met really top people in their fields, like Buckminster Fuller who wrote the preface for his geometry for children book when it came out in the 70s. I got in touch with Einar about the calculations for a complex geodesic structure I was working on and we became friends and worked on various projects together. The question of the decentralisation of the modern, objective art space came up, and the question of the dematerialisation of the art object, which has come back into the foreground again over the last ten years. This is why I like the most utopian architects and thinkers: they've got that ability to think about their own vision from the outside. I'm working more and more with people like that, getting more involved in works integrated into spatial projects, but involving them more in my own work as well. The whole field of architecture is changing fast and that really inspires me. Artistic practice has rediscovered its ability to constantly redefine its own programme, and architectural discourse has opened up to other fields in the same way. This is why the fact of integrating architects – and engineers and experts as well – is crucial for me in opening up to other ways of working.

HUO: Via all these cooperative ventures, you manage in spite of everything to get into a collective consideration of the role of the public, of the viewer, in relation to the works, either at exhibitions or in architectural and urban spaces. The viewer never gets left out of these interdisciplinary discussions.

OE: The museum and exhibition scene too often makes the public passive, instead of stimulating it. The way institutions communicate means they keep on standardising people's thinking and objectivising their way of seeing. If the public gets involved in a stimulating situation, the situation "commits itself" in return. There's an reversal of subject and object here: the viewer becomes the object and the context becomes the subject. I always try to turn the viewer into what's on show, make him mobile and dynamic. My Tokyo installation is an example of this: a geometrical shape is projected onto a wall and as you look at it, it disappears, leaving an afterimage on the retina for a minute or so. Here the projectors become the viewers and the viewer becomes the object.

HUO: The object turns into the subject?

OE: Yes, but in constant movement: subject, object, subject, object and so on. And that's something you can use. It's not a loss of capacity, but a potential that's both positive and productive.

HUO: Jonathan Crary talks about a "Deleuzian" virtuality in your work. In the sense not of a virtual reality, but of a dimension of the possible. Do you agree with that analysis?

OE: Up to a few years ago the feeling of the virtual was so omnipresent that you had to bring it in, apply it like a kind of grid. Today, though, virtuality means interactivity. The important thing is that it should have an impact on you and you on it; so it contains a certain element of unpredictability.