

**AD**

**YOUR  
UNCERTAIN  
ARCHIVE**

**BY STUDIO  
OLAFUR  
ELIASSON**

Two weeks before Olafur Eliasson's exhibition *Riverbed* opened at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, an anaesthetist put him to sleep. Moments before, Eliasson asked the doctor, "Can you make me weightless?" But the doctor didn't listen. And then Eliasson was asleep.

"I had this incredible dream that I was moonwalking," he says. As doctors operated on his hand following an accident suffered during his summer holiday, Eliasson dreamed of doing the moonwalk. "And I was really good at it – much better than I ever was." The Danish-Icelandic artist is good at telling stories, and they generally take you somewhere unexpected. Moonwalking under narcosis, for example, comes up in response to the question, "How was your holiday?"

We are sitting in Eliasson's studio. He's been based in Berlin since 1995 and his current premises take up four floors of a former brewery in Prenzlauerberg, a district north of the city centre. It's Saturday and the normally bustling office is quiet, but not empty: the studio's lead architect Sebastian Behmann is working on a plan for a project in Addis Ababa; a woman in the finance department is fine-tuning the contract for the studio's takeover of the building next door; and Christina Werner of Institut für Raumexperimente is putting the finishing touches to a book about that institute's five-year existence within Eliasson's studio – it is an extension of the College of Fine Arts at Berlin University. An artist from Brussels is here too, waiting patiently to see Eliasson about a future collaboration.

Eliasson's practice now spans major architectural projects such as the 2011 Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavik, made in collaboration with Henning Larsen Architects and Batteríð Architects; installations such as *Riverbed*, for which more than 180 tonnes of Icelandic volcanic rock were shipped to Denmark; four man-made Waterfalls in New York City, installed for the summer months of 2008 at a cost of £9.4m; and *The Weather Project* at Tate Modern in 2003, which drew 2 million visitors. But despite the sheer size of his built projects, I'm here to talk to Eliasson about the studio's new website *Your Uncertain Archive*, the theme Eliasson picked for the residency of *Disegno No.7*.

To date, I have stumbled in, been temporarily blinded by, and napped in Eliasson's art installations. They don't call for a normal response from visitors, instead demanding their full physical attention, as if Eliasson wishes to prod and jolt, to challenge us physically. That's why his choice of residency topic is so surprising: it's about a virtual rather than a physical interaction. But like most of his work, *Your Uncertain Archive* has a rigid and inventive research process with numerous experiments behind it. It has taken four years to conceive and build, and over the pages of this issue, we will get a rare insight into the process the studio followed to get to the end result, which launched on the same day that *Riverbed* opened.

The studio is like a laboratory, with daily experiments taking place. For example, the day after Eliasson's surgery he decided to try an experiment focusing on weightlessness, and asked his assistants to rig up a crane with a meteorite on one end and a harness on the other. It was filmed: Eliasson moonwalking while suspended from the crane, the meteorite balancing his weight. A still from this film is one of countless studio images that will join *Your Uncertain Archive*.

Eliasson has more than 90 staff, but it's a number that doesn't daunt him. "I think scale is defined by the number of people who do the same thing. So, if a muscle in our body does one thing, it gets very big, but I would see my studio as a lot of different muscles that together performs a whole body."

Last month, the owner of a Berlin-based IT startup walked into the studio and said, "I like the atmosphere in here. It looks like my place down the street. We also have 90 people but we're only six months old." Eliasson was horrified. "People don't appreciate slowness," he says. "Anybody can do something in six months. Do something and have it look like this in 20 years, then I'll be impressed. People underestimate the fact that being around for 20 years is actually not very easy."

## INSTEAD OF ARCHIVES TURNING INTO DUST-COLLECTING HEAPS OF KNOWLEDGE, THEY CAN BE PROACTIVE REALITY MACHINES.

**The studio's homepage already provides imagery, publications and films about what it does. What motivated you to create something like *Your Uncertain Archive*?**

It turns out that we have quite a lot of people passing through our homepage. It also turns out that more people are familiar with my work through the homepage than from seeing it in exhibitions. As far as I can tell, a lot of the visitors are in parts of the world where I haven't exhibited much. So I grew to respect these people, because they were making the effort to look it up. I thought this was very precious and that I should invest more artistic focus into it. So rather than creating a more conventional archival search facility, we started getting more ideologically involved. The studio has an archive department that works as a research and development team and is closely involved with the creation of the artworks. It researches relevant scientific processes, both spatially and psychologically. At the same time, we are also following different types of media and how critical media evolves. So, when we were reconsidering what an archive is, we already had a lot of internal resources that fuelled the discussion, but essentially we wanted to present something that was closer to the principle of an exhibition and more remote from the conventional archive.

**So, within the research process, you reconsidered what an archive is. What**

**possibilities interest you the most about this particular digital archive?**

The question is if an archive is something retroactive, which, informally or not, tends to suggest an objective view of the past; or if it's more of a subjective facilitator, which actually nurtures a proactive approach and suggests that is also about writing a narrative that's more concerned with the future than the past. There is a very robust discussion within museology and art history about reconsidering the notion of historiography, the role of authorship, the place of the subject with regards to attempting to be truthful or not, the illusion of truth and the illusion of reality. There is also a general need to find a systematic way to make use of archives, which are collections of knowledge. Instead of archives turning into dust-collecting heaps of knowledge, they can be proactive reality machines. One has to see these in the context of the internet being increasingly thin: it becomes hard to find substance. Internet archives form a much-needed qualitative muscle. I think a lot of places are turning archives, from a passive box waiting for you to go and look through, into something proactive. For example, we like to make short films and gifs and we use them when making artworks, but also for documenting the making of those works. It creates this small window into the studio that we didn't have before. This for me has to do with developing a more direct relationship with the people who would normally >

# THE ONLY UNCERTAINTY IN THE INTERNET IS WHEN THERE ARE FAILURES, OR CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM. WHICH IS WHY WE ALL ENJOY HACKERS.

> go to a museum, and gives them a better impression of what goes on inside an artist's studio. Now I have a direct feed that bypasses the institutional layer.

**This direct relationship with a viewer is a prominent part of your work – specifically the experiments you offer online, such as Your Exhibition Guide, an app where you challenge how we experience and interact with art. You make a collaborator of the viewer and you see them as a co-producer of both real and virtual space.**

I try to think of a viewer as somebody who is not just viewing something with their eyes. I also want to encourage the body to be a viewing machine, one that uses all the senses. But the commodification of our senses within the market economy has led to the senses becoming passive consumers. This means you, as the subject, take in your surroundings like a consumer driven by greed and laziness. I think we underestimate the significance of the impact this idea of the consuming, passive user has had on how art is experienced. So, my interest in the viewer has been to see if we can turn

around that role in the context of the museum. In a museum you would want people to not only experience the artwork but also to reconsider the rules under which we are experiencing the world. That's why I think we owe it to a person who visits the homepage or an exhibition to show we trust them, that we do not patronise them, we do not systematise them. We take them for what they are and we respect them. We involve ourselves in a dialogue and we see where that will take us.

**One of the outcomes of that outlook is Your Uncertain Archive. What is it exactly?**

Your Uncertain Archive contains everything I have in terms of prints, pictures, sketches, artworks. It's the complete bulk, the heap of everything. It's disregarding importance and disregarding quality, it's just an unbelievable mass of material. To say the archive is uncertain is of course to suggest that the user is important, because the archive is just a whole lot of zeros and ones. The uncertainty lies in how we have worked very hard to build an associative search system,

which means that should you not know exactly what you are looking for, this presents you with a perfect area in which you can drift and sail around. This idea of drifting – of searching, essentially, for the sake of searching – is something that is relevant when it comes to exhibitions, for instance.

**But why did you want to emphasise uncertainty in an online archive?**

Uncertainty, in our world, is considered to be something negative. It's closely associated with failure and we live in a world where being decisive is being successful, where hesitating is often seen as a sign of weakness. Everything is just so incredibly driven into either/or, up/down, in/out. There is a polarising system where being in the middle, between black and white, is considered not just a failure, but also a threat. So, I think the principle of uncertainty is a luxury that society fails to appreciate, to trust somebody to be able to write their own narrative exercises confidence that people are good enough, that they are capable enough. Unfortunately, when we look at the internet – not just archival systems, but the internet as a whole – it is clear that it seems to think people are incredibly stupid, very arrogant and only interested in consumer-driven and quantifiable ideologies. The only uncertainty in the internet is when there are failures, or cracks in the system, which is why we all enjoy hackers.

**How do you build uncertainty into a system that still has to be extremely structured in order to work?**

Well, this is why we started to do a lot of associative stuff. It seems that the internet is still in its infancy. The more you look at it, the more you realise it's relatively clumsy, barely capable of walking, holding on to anything solid to prevent it from falling over, just like a baby. But once you have a closer look, it has a lot of amazing associative potential. That has to do with the use of the interface and the fantasy and creativity through which one can design and build architecture online, so what might come across as a little bit obscure at the start actually has a large, very soft skeleton in it. I think we have taken inspiration from cosmology, physics and science on one side, and the more innovative computer games on the other. There is a game called

Flower, like a non-purpose floating game, you just kind of surf, very nonviolent and also a bit esoteric. There's another one called Mountain, which I also like. We looked into Oculus Rift, but we haven't fully engaged with it. So, basically, there were a number of inspirational sources. But there was also a need to give people the confidence that their involvement actually has a structural impact. Both with the text, but also with the actual hand-mouse interface. We made an effort with that, but we will see whether it will actually work. We worked very hard on the tangibility; I am interested in how something feels in your hand.

**You mentioned that you did a lot of associative stuff. What exactly did you do?**

As a studio we often do experiments and workshops. One of the things we looked at was how it feels to hold a meteorite in your hand. There was, of course, the reaction that it was very heavy. But besides that, you start to realise that you are, for the first time, holding something in your hand that is not from this planet. Obviously there is no way of detecting that in the homepage, but it was an interesting exercise nonetheless. The other exercise we did was on how it feels to be an animal. Here in the studio we try to increase the conviction that there is no culture vs. nature, there is only nature. So we do our Timothy Morton dance in the morning and then everybody tries, not with a very high success rate, to be animals.

**How do you know if you've been successful at being an animal?**

Well, it's actually surprisingly difficult to become an animal. A good example is the lion paw. I have to, for the sake of credit, be clear that it's the French conceptual dancer Xavier Le Roy and his amazing wife Esther who came here and did the lion-training experiment with us. So, for beginners like myself you start with the paw and it takes a few months to learn how to walk like a lion. But I totally admit that this is not detectable in the homepage. As I said, the internet is still an infant, because soon, holding a mouse, drifting in Your Uncertain Archive is going to feel like, if you so choose, being a lion. ●

**Johanna Agerman Ross** is the editor-in-chief of Disegno.

<sup>1</sup>Timothy Morton is an object-oriented philosopher with whom Olafur Eliasson has dialogues. The dance is an attempt to experience things from a non-human perspective.

# MAPPING

Mapping ideas is like travelling through the landscape of one's own mind. But when ideas crystallise in a map, it isn't the first spatial form they've taken. As we frame an idea and work to give it a communicable shape, it transitions from a (neuro)spatial process within us to an empathic, shared space outside us.

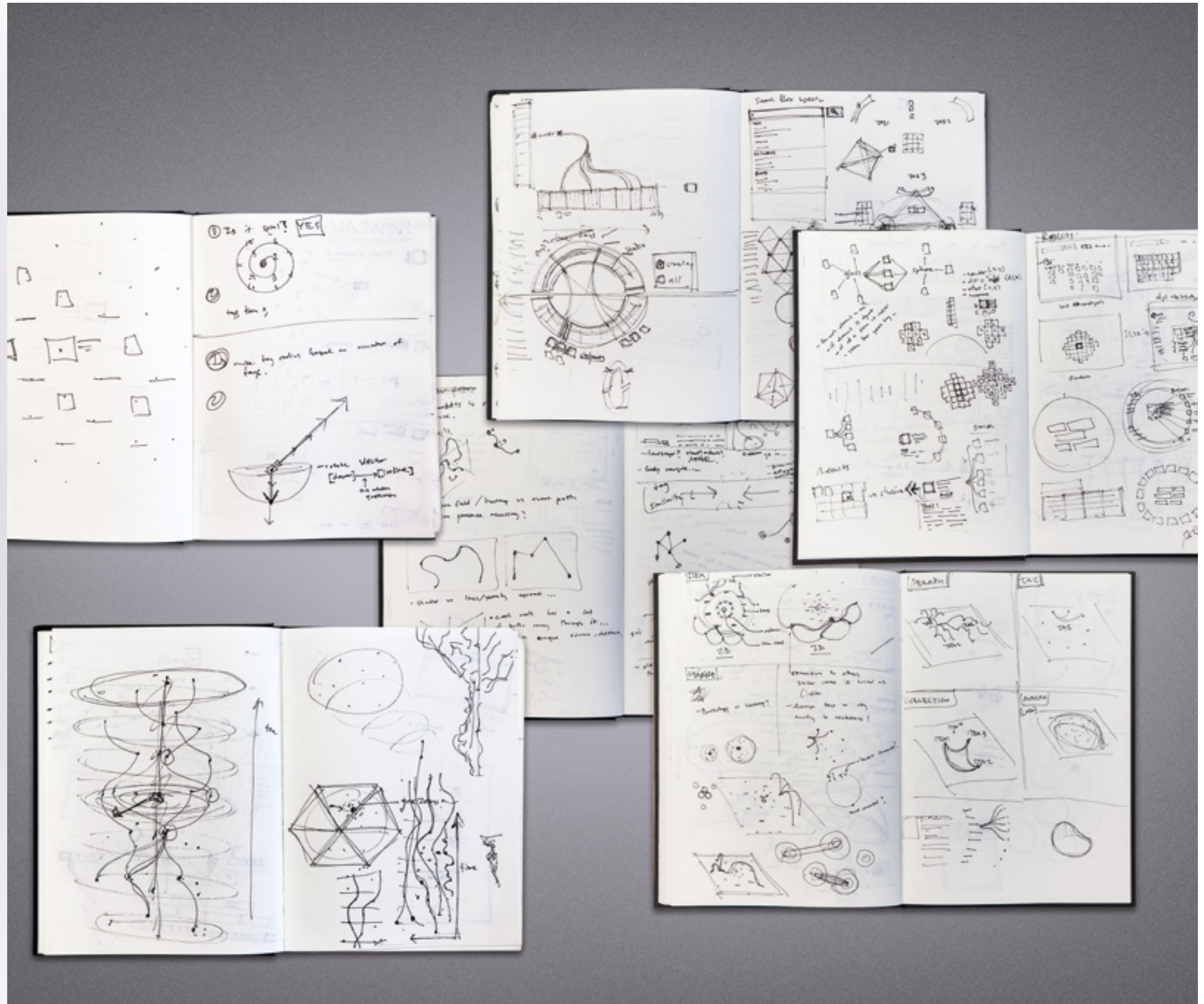
Tracing the course of emerging ideas is central to Your Uncertain Archive. It reflects the thinking and doing that takes place at the studio, whether for artworks, exhibitions, transmissions or publications. Upon entering the site, visitors take part in mapping and become co-producers of an ongoing collective spatial process.



# SKETCHES AND NOTEBOOKS

A notebook, like a personal parliament,<sup>1</sup> is a space for all things,<sup>1</sup> a territory encouraging constant renegotiation. Its pages are transcripts from the debates and congresses of developing thoughts, dispatches from the associative space of ideas emerging internally and with others.

The development of Your Uncertain Archive involved a team of archivists, designers and coders who worked with Olafur Eliasson to create an open online space, a living archive of works and thoughts. The sketches presented here are taken from the notebook of the studio's web designer Daniel Massey, and reflect visually the conversations and debates that informed the layers of drawing, programming, and negotiation at work in the archive.



<sup>1</sup> The Icelandic parliament is the Alþingi, which translates as "all-thing".

# TAGS

To make a system of organisation and classification is to propose a new world, to reconsider the logic that will shape what we encounter. We must impose certain organising principles and exclude others, and while our decisions about these principles may be deliberate, the process is essentially subjective. Certainty - vis-à-vis order - is something we construct.

In libraries both virtual and real, tags tend to suggest certainty. The extensive tagging system developed by Studio Olafur Eliasson for Your Uncertain Archive, on the other hand, employs tags as tools of uncertainty, bringing together artworks, exhibitions, models, books, talks and research through diverse associations. Unpredictable connections arise; new relationships form, inspiring and producing meaning. A tag is a question, not an answer.

*activity tag →!*  
*stipulative label?*

*technique vs. media vs. type*

*Medium*

*coll. + work-on.*

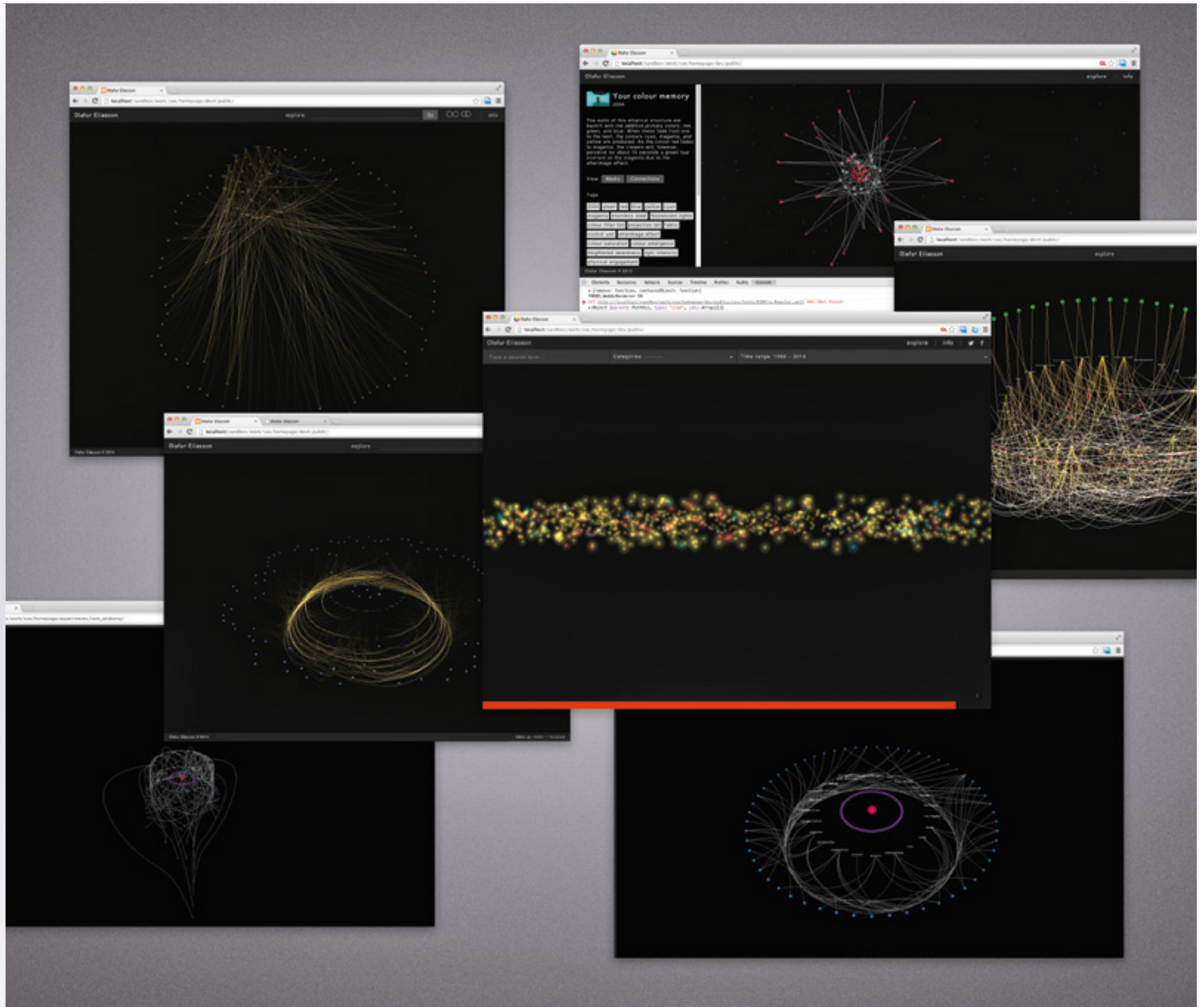
*Ideal/Analyse*

*action Generation*

for web archive / external - for internal eyes only	Commodification	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Husserl, Edmund	Mineral	Quotation	Television
A Laboratory of Mediating Space	Community	External (as in not Olafur's work)	ISSSDO	Mirror	Reality	Temporality
Afterimages	Compassion	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Ice	Mixed media	Reality ?	Teufelsberg
Animal	Composition	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Iceland	Mock-ups	production	Texture
Architecture	Concept	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Iceland location	Model	Reflection	Thorsteinn,
Archive	Constellation	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Idea	Model room	Reflectivity	Einar
Arithmetic	Constructions	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Infra	Module/modulation	Repetition	Three-dimensional
Art car	Context	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Infrastructure	Molecular	Responsibility	Time
Artist's statement	Contour	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Inside	Moon	Research	Tourism
Artworks	Contrast	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Inside/Outside	Movement	Reykjavik	Tower
Arrangement	Conversations	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Installation	Multiplicity	Rhombic	Transient
Artefact	Cooling unit	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Institutions	Museum	triacotahedron	Transparency
Atmosphere	Coffee breaks	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Integration	Music	Rotation	Triangle
Audio	Collectivity	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Intensity	Natural light	Seasons (rather: winter, spring, summer, autumn?)	Tunnel
Basalt	Community	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Interiority	Negotiation	Self	Unprescribed encounters
Being	Coproduce	External (as in not Olafur's work)	James, William	Newman, Barnett	Sequence	Urban space
Being with	Cover	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Kaleidoscope	Networking	Series	Urbanism
Being singular plural	Crystal	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Knowledge	Night	Set up	Utopia
Bhutan	(crystalline)	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Kunsthau	Now	SFMOMA	Variations
Black glass	Crystal palace (Wigley-Eliasson conversation)	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Bregenz	Painting	Shadow	Vibrations
Body	Cultural institution	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Laboratory	Object	Shared	Video
Book	Dark matter	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Landscape	Observatory	production (or: co-production)	Vortex
Border	Day	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Large scale	Obsidian	Shared space	Wall
Breathing	Destabilisation	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Larsen, Henning	Orientation	Simulation	Water
Brick	Dichromatic	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Layers	The Other	Site-specific art	Waterfalls
Bronze	Dimension	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Lectures	Otto, Frei	Sketch	Weather
Buckmeister Fuller	Distance	External (as in not Olafur's work)	LED light	Outside	Sketch	Welfare state
Building	Dome	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Leibniz, G.W.	Parliament	Skin	White cube
Cabinet	Domus	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Lenbachhaus	Participants	Slow motion	Wood
Car	Doughnut	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Light	Pattern	Society	Work
Cardboard	Drawings	External (as in not Olafur's work)	LIS (Life in Space, Life is Space)	Pauling, Linus	Space	descriptions
Chronology	Drift	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Louisiana	Pavillion	Space filler	Work
Chronophotography	Duo-colour	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Luminosity	Permanent installation	Spatial	statements
Circles	Echo-object	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Lunds Konsthall	Perspective	Sphere	Wire
Circulation	Einstein, Albert	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Martin Gropius	Pfaueninsel (Peacock Island)	Speed	Wunderkammer (Daston)
City	Emotions	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Bau	Pinakothek der Moderne, München	Spiral	YES - Your Engagement Sequence
Cityscape	Energy	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Mequettes	Polyhedric	Stackable	Zumthor, Peter
Climate	Engagement	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Mathematical system	Presence	Stamp	
Cluster	Entertainment industry	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Mediated motion	Process	Steel	
Cold	Environment	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Mediation	Project	Stockmarket	
Collaboration	Event	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Meditation	Projection	Structure	
Collection	Exhibition	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Meditation (Lorraine Daston's text)	Prototype	Studio	
Collectivity	Expansivity	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Memory	Public space	Study	
Colour	Experiments	External (as in not Olafur's work)	Meteorology	Quasi	Sun	
Colour zones	Experience	External (as in not Olafur's work)		Quasibrick ?	Sustainability	
Columns	Exteriority	External (as in not Olafur's work)			Symposium	
		External (as in not Olafur's work)			Talks	

# VISUALISATION

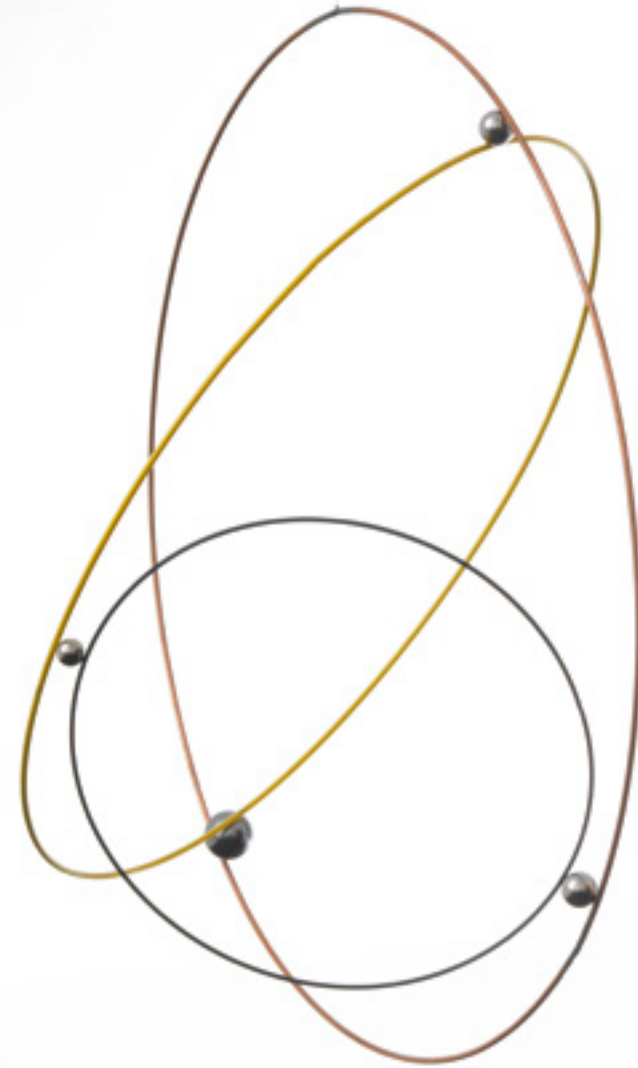
Various attempts were made to visualise the complex clusters of associations surrounding an archival object. In the process of finding a visual language to communicate the relationships and connections between artworks and ideas, the hand-drawn sketches were translated into the language of the web.



# ORIENTATION

Compasses aid orientation, allowing us to situate ourselves in relation to a map or grid. In other words, compasses allow us to see ourselves within a context. If you reflect on the fact that all magnetic needles point the same way, you realise very quickly that compasses orient us not only geographically but also socially. Everywhere in the world, we share the particular visual sensation of compasses pointing in the same direction: the compass binds us to one another.

Your Uncertain Archive is entered from Eliasson's homepage by clicking on a moving compass. This evasive navigational instrument serves as the door to an open space, where intuition becomes the visitor's compass.





# MODELS

The language of a visual artist is usually nonverbal, and the artist's reaction to an experience is frequently a spatial proposition, making explicit some space. An idea or an experience can often be expressed better in a spatial context than verbally.

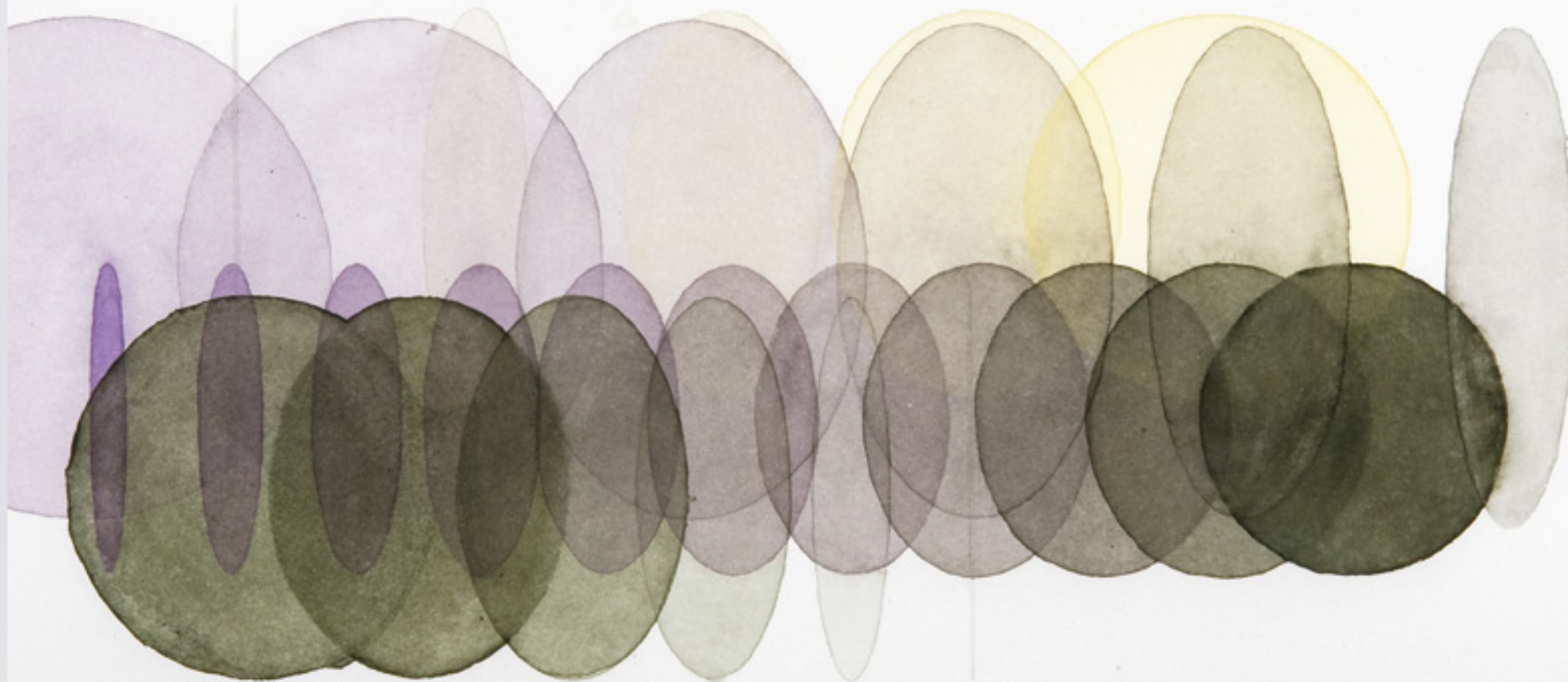
Models are not rationalised stations on the way to some perfected object, but fully real in their instability. The studio's model room – an archive of intricately constructed prototypes, mock-ups and studies – is a laboratory for geometric investigations, a lexicon of space.



# LAYERS

Watercolours layer time. Thin washes of contrasting colours create density and disclose the paintings' gradual creation. The transparency and layers of Eliasson's watercolours skirt representation, allowing us to explore our perception of depth and duration. The arrangement of similar shapes and related shades triggers our tendency to read three-dimensionality and motion into two-dimensional compositions. Colours and shapes overlay, and we think, for an instant, that we see time frozen and processes unfold in synchronicity.

In *Your Uncertain Archive*, ideas and objects slowly float and align in layers of synchronicity and coincidence, creating new contexts and unforeseen meanings.



# YOUR UNCERTAIN ARCHIVE

Your Uncertain Archive connects you to the artworks, texts, sketches, interests and ideas that make up Olafur Eliasson's practice. Visitors to the page receive various tools for navigating the site, yet rather than organise the material into predictable patterns or groups, these tools lead users to unorthodox topographies. Straight-line chronologies are replaced by molecules of thematic connection. The list disappears as the standard of organisation, and visitors instead drift through an endlessly rearranging sea of thoughts and works. Neither a simple webpage nor a mere container for facts and dates, the work is a reality-producing machine, built to generate new content through proximity and contact. Your Uncertain Archive is a living artwork exhibited in the landscape of the web.

