Frictional Encounters

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The Icelandic parliament is called the *Althing*, which means 'a space for all things'. As Bruno Latour writes, *thing*, deriving from Old English and German, denotes not so much an object as controversy or strife. One could therefore look at the Althing as a space for all controversies, all negotiations. For me, the most important issue is not the outcome of such frictional negotiations, but the fact that we engage in dialogues. Finding controversy at the heart of the thing entails an opening up of this thing to relativity; it becomes responsive to the context in which it is located.

In the art world, objects and works can be understood as relative, not least because they depend on the responses of the viewers or users. Like many before me, I work with the dematerialisation of the object and with handing over responsibility to the user of the artwork. By insisting that the users co-produce the works through their perceptions and expectations, I try to create situations where the work disappears as a stable thing in itself; instead, a fragile contract between the work as experiential setup and its experiencing–thinking user is established. This is rooted in the immediate physical surroundings and, ultimately, in a larger socio-political context.

Today, the term *experience* is suffering somewhat from its own success. The experience economy has taken over part of the experiential territory previously nurtured by the arts in particular. However, this is not as troubling as it may at first seem: the market-oriented trajectory of the experience economy is so quick that art – fortunately! – is left behind as the half-slow other. The difference between a superficial experience sales strategy and our engagement with art is clear: the latter is not subject to mere consumption. The obvious objection to the experience economy (one I feel keenly) is that it, eager to sell, misses the conflict in things or purposely tries to ignore this altogether.

What interests me is how you can create a form that has the potential to co-produce reality. Regardless of what I say or do, it is embedded in a certain socio-economic structure. Contemporary culture – especially entertainment culture and the consumer industry – has a tendency to favour the timeless object or even the image of an object, since that seems most profitable; it is simply easier to sell. But by excluding time, one also excludes the possibility of change. Then we stop looking at the world as an agglomeration of causal relationships – which I think it is. And if we do not recognise that our actions have very direct consequences for our surroundings, we lose our sense of responsibility. The challenge is to do something that has an impact on the world while acknowledging this fact.

Continuous renegotiations keep an object or a system – political, social, or artistic – supple and, ultimately, interesting. I think any structure should have a little parliament: a household should have one, a school, a city, a society. Here, the participants would be able to evaluate themselves in relation to the rest of reality and thus establish an encyclopaedic attitude to the world that nurtures difference as our common base.

The following pages set out examples of how I work with the notions of negotiation, friction, temporality, and engagement in my installations, interventions, and architectural work.

Making (Urban) Landscapes Real

In 1997, I emptied a water reservoir in Johannesburg that was located opposite the exhibition hall where one of my photo series was being shown as part of the Second Johannesburg Biennale. I called the unannounced intervention *Erosion*. The water was pumped from the reservoir out into the street, where it turned into a small stream and ran down a parking lot and through a little park, carrying dirt and leaves with it. The people in the city were forced to jump over the stream or to change their planned direction in order not to get their feet wet. This change in the urban environment created a slight friction, an interruption of the way in which the people normally moved. Friction is needed in order to exercise criticality; it offers the possibility of arguing from different points of view. In urban planning, friction evokes a moment in which you suddenly see yourself and the city from a different perspective. To me, the success of a public space lies precisely in the degree to which the space allows the user to reflect on why it has value or lacks value – an evaluation that is prompted by friction. My little stream thus introduced a temporary critical glance at the well-known public space of Johannesburg.

Another intervention, *Green river*, originally from 1998, I have made in several places: Bremen (1998); the small Norwegian town of Moss (1998); the Northern Fjallabak Route, a remote river in Iceland (1998); Los Angeles (1999); Stockholm (2000); and Tokyo (2001). This work consists of a perfectly harmless, water-soluble dye, called uranine, that is thrown into a river. Over the course of a few hours, the dye colours the river an intense green. Used, among other things, to test ocean currents, it has a fluorescent colour that reacts very strongly to daylight.

At none of the venues did I tell anyone about the project before doing it; it was not official, and no invitations were sent out. Because it was a hit-and-run project, I put a great deal of effort into the planning, measuring the water currents and turbulence for a few days by throwing small pieces of paper into the water. On the day following my intervention in Stockholm, there was a story in the newspaper explaining that concerned people had called the police and were told that the colour came from a heating-plant spill and that it was not dangerous at all. This says something about Sweden, which is always able to come up with the right answer to reassure people!

My idea was to explore whether we see the water as a dynamic element of the city or as a static image. Is it real or is it a representation? I think Stockholm has been colonised by its own image; it has become a pretty downtown area that lacks the ability to integrate change and time critically. Although our engagement and movement through the city are always temporal, the city has fostered a static image of itself. It has become a representation. So I dyed the river green in order to add spatial depth and temporality to the place, to add reality.

Since there was no art institution hosting *Green river*, the uncertainty that is central to the project became more tangible. The fact that someone actually called the police confirms that the river was not perceived as a mere

representation. Had the project been generated within an institutional context, it would have been perceived as Art with a secure representational distance to urban reality.

How do we relate to water? How does the presence of a river influence the way in which we move within the city? With *The New York City Waterfalls* (2008), I tried to raise these questions and more. When water flows down the East River, which separates Manhattan and Brooklyn, we tend to see it as a simple surface, framed by the neutral urban waterfronts. By elevating it into four waterfalls, I aimed at amplifying its physical and tangible presence while exposing the dynamics of natural forces such as gravity, wind, and daylight. When you look at a waterfall, you see the time it takes for the water to fall and implicitly experience the distance between yourself and the water. Does the mist fall on your face? Do you hear the water roaring? Or do you only imagine the sound you know to be there? I would argue that a waterfall makes the production of space explicit – and this against the iconic New York skyline, whose image-like qualities are otherwise often stressed. My idea was to encourage people to identify more with the waterfronts, which, until recently, have been underutilised as creative and recreational spaces, since people have focused primarily on the interior grid of the city.

By creating the waterfalls within the cityscape, I hoped to emphasise the value of seeing nature as a construction. The structures themselves consisted of everyday industrial materials – scaffolding and pumps – that were clearly visible. They were as real as any waterfalls; it was real water falling. I did not want to reinitiate the discussion of nature versus culture or the natural versus the artificial, but to open up the possibility of a nature-based experience within an urban setting and to urge people to reconsider their experiences of nature.

With the waterfalls, my aim was to meld the spectacular with the intimate. The structures operated on a grand scale, but equally, I hope, offered personal and challenging setups to the people visiting the sites. The individual and the collective were put into play; this relationship, set at the centre of the dense social, cultural, environmental, and political fabric that makes up New York, is crucial to me. It requires a re-examination of how we move within the city and what kind of responsibility for it we take upon ourselves.

Heliotropic Investigations

The dichotomy of representation/reality, obvious in *Green river* as well as in the waterfalls, reappears in my work *Double sunset* (1999), which was set in the western part of Utrecht. I had a yellow disc, thirty-eight metres in diameter and supported by scaffolding, installed on top of an industrial building. Floodlights from a football stadium across the street lit up the disc at dusk, making it look like a second sun setting next to the natural one. But my sun was also real, an odd object that may have turned people's heads in wonder: where was west all of a sudden? It asked: how do you orient yourself in relation to the sun? What structures, natural and artificial, determine the layout of city life? Who owns the sun? What would two suns do to our understanding of the universe?

Despite the fact that a clear distinction between representation and reality seems awkward in our postmodern, media-influenced world, I find it productive to retain the dichotomy. It permeates discussions about experience: are our experiences direct or indirect? Do they involve our bodies or not? These discussions entail sensitive concepts such as presence and immersion – and the latter is losing meaning as I write. 'Immerse yourself and all will be well', the experience economy promises. But I would advocate immersion at a distance, paradoxical as it may sound: be enchanted while acknowledging how the enchantment is fabricated. Or: be taken in while being aware of the friction in the thing or artwork. Controversy is productive.

Another work based on our perception of time and space, and revolving around the sun is *Your sun machine* (1997), for which I cut a hole in the roof of the Marc Foxx Gallery in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, to let the daylight enter the exhibition space. In the course of the day, a small beam of light would travel slowly through it, making the visitors aware of the movement of the sun in relation to the earth. The artwork as thing was dissolved into a relation between cosmic movements and an individual sense of place and duration.

I have also initiated a series of sun-path studies, based on our perception of the sun travelling across the sky in relation to our position on earth, one of which was concretised in the installation *Dagslyspavillon* (2007). This pavilion was generated through a site-specific sun-path diagram, plotted through measurements of sunrises and sunsets in Hørsholm, Denmark, where the work is permanently placed. My idea has been to study how the movements of the sun and the earth in relation to each other, as viewed from a particular latitude, can be used to define a spatial shape. If you stand in the middle of the pavilion, the sun will follow the lower steel beam at the day of winter solstice, whereas the upper beam traces the movement of the sun at summer solstice. The pavilion thus charts out the different celestial positions of the sun. Space becomes heliotropic. Were the pavilion to be moved to a location with a different latitude, the architecture would no longer 'fit' the sun.

The perspective is reversible: instead of taking up a heliotropic stance – looking towards the sun – we could examine objects bathed in sunlight. Since the sun's journey across the sky depends on our location, the shadow of an object depends on the object's placement. Take the example of the photograph of a football in Iceland (the player in the image is my friend Philippe Parreno). Its shadow is more than three times as long as the ball itself – a beautiful ellipse. In Venice, the ball's shadow would be long for a shorter time; at the equator, even more briefly. My question: how does the variability of shadow length influence our understanding of objecthood?

The Co-production of Colour

I have made a number of afterimage experiments, some of which have been channelled into artworks. A recent example is *The inside of outside* (2008). This work explores our understanding of space, based on the afterimages that we produce in response to a series of colour projections. Inspired by Construc-

tivist films from the beginning of the last century, especially Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921), I have made different versions, also putting to work elements from the colour theory of Josef Albers. *The inside of outside* consists of twenty-four source-four spotlights mounted to a wall and projecting coloured forms onto the opposing wall in a prearranged order. The idea is for the visitors to look at the little cross at the centre of the projection. After about ten seconds they begin to produce afterimages. If the main colour on the wall is yellow, they see a purplish form. So the visitors' colours, produced by their brains, are layered on top of mine in response.

Imagine a world without colour, without even nuances. Orientation would be more than difficult, survival a real issue.

Perception in Movement

Your rainbow panorama (2006–2010) is a project for the rooftop of ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum in Denmark. It consists of an elevated 360-degree walkway and *The ARoS prism*. The 150-metre-long walkway is enclosed within rainbow-coloured glass. Wherever you are in the walkway, the panoramic view of Aarhus, the sky, and the horizon will appear almost monochromatic through the glass panes, but the appearance of the surroundings changes according to your movement. In one direction, your view will be mediated by one colour; in another direction, the mediating colour will be a different one.

The work is not so much an art object as a context, and this context explicitly influences what we see. The rainbow colours are filters that shade our view of the surroundings. In a similar manner, a museum creates filters – filters that much too often remain hidden to the average visitor. This happens when museums neglect their responsibility to present not just the works, but also themselves as distinctive architectural and ideological frameworks. The way I see it, people's filtered vision on the ARoS rooftop is similar to their filtered perceptions inside the museum – the difference being that the rooftop environment makes the mediation obvious.

On sunny days, a cascade of prismatic light will be projected onto the interior of the spheric *ARoS prism*. This is the result of a series of prisms mounted in the walls of the sphere. The use of daylight emphasises the continuously changing relation between colour, light, and space. By completing one circuit of the panoramic walkway, the visitors will have journeyed through all the colours of the spectrum.

Like *Your rainbow panorama*, the *Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2007* in London works with movement as the vehicle of perception. A collaboration with the Norwegian architect Kjetil Thorsen from the architectural practice Snøhetta, the pavilion began with the idea, somewhat unusual for such a structure, of vertical circulation. Visitors had to walk up a 140-metre-long spiralling ramp that made the geometrically complex pavilion change in appearance with each step taken. While the ramp connected inside and outside, building and park, the space was sculpted by visitors as they walked up and down. It was about creating a friction between space, gravity, and slow movements. Our

aim was to give the pavilion a shape that would stretch temporality – stretching in the sense that it almost translated your presence into temporal matter.

The oculus at the apex of the roof was not circular, but ellipsoidal. If you draw an ellipse on a piece of paper and show a tilted circular disc in three dimensions, they will appear to be the same in the perspectival system. By looking from different angles at the circular oculus in the ceiling of the Pantheon in Rome, for instance, and seeing how the elliptical shape deviates from the circular hole, you can estimate more or less where you are in the space. In the *Serpentine Pavilion*, however, the elliptical oculus does not reveal your position in relation to it. You cannot tell where you are within the space by looking at it. In this way, the pavilion oculus destabilises the idea of a vanishing point. On the other hand, we invoked an optical illusion by triangulating the wood panelling on both the inside and outside. The triangles decreased in size closer to the oculus. At the top of the ramp, a small, one-person balcony was situated, which allowed you to view the space from a bird's-eye point of view, suddenly giving you a much more defined view of space and dimensions. In this way, different stories were told simultaneously in order to criticise and contradict each other.

Borrowing a term from Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist called the pavilion a 'content machine'. Content is not simply generated by a fixed form; it happens when people go from a state of indifference to a state of difference. The content is the difference. And if the shape of the pavilion can transport people from indifference to difference whether they like it or not, we have created something. Every aspect of the design was laid out to suggest that if you moved, the pavilion would look slightly different.

A building as content machine; an artwork as relation – these may be considered things (think Latour), but if so, they are tenacious, conflict-amplifying things; things of resistance, embracing difference and negotiation. Things are never simple. Things are never stable. Supple and fluctuating, they reverberate with different meanings from one discourse, one set of thoughts or visions, to the next. Real things are not subject to instant consumption. Like a pebble in your shoe, they make you halt. They are your blind spots, affording perspectives otherwise forgotten or ignored by fast-forward consumerism. Temporal through and through, things and artworks insist on our engagement, and, layered in a complex mesh of relations with other things, people, and environments, they – with us – can change the world.