

THE WHYS AND HOWS OF MY ART-MAKING

Olafur Eliasson in conversation with Anna Engberg-Pedersen

Why do you make art?

—To make art, for me, means to be in dialogue with the world. People may not always like my ideas or artworks, but even so I am acknowledged as a speaker, as a contributor, which makes me feel I'm part of the times I live in. This is crucial to me, because it allows me to be conscious of my own existence. It is through this feeling of connectedness that I can sense the agency my artworks have in the world.

When I create installations and other spatial experiments, I basically construct milieus in which life can be examined. I'm particularly interested in our senses, in physical movement, in our notions of self and community. Looking at art – or meeting up with art, as I sometimes say – requires a blending of perception, emotion, and cognition that I find relevant to almost everything we – people – do. Art presents a holistic perspective on what it means to be a human being.

Art is ultimately made to be experienced. How does your thinking about viewers and their experiences inform your artistic work?

—You never look at something as if for the first time. Your gaze is essentially old, even though the artwork might be new to you. Your gaze is shaped by your past experiences and by your expectations, shaped within a given cultural-geopolitical framework. Encountering a work of art is, to a great extent, about recognition and identification, about feeling listened to – and then there's the element of surprise and uncertainty where identification collapses. As an artist I work actively with this – I integrate what I expect people's expectations to be into the artwork. I am keen to make works that exist to be seen while also inviting reflection on how they are seen.

How does this reflection play out?

—Some artworks look like experimental set-ups. They're clearly up for negotiation. Others hold your wonder, your deliberation on 'what is this all about?' These works make your wonder a part of their being. They expect your engagement, elicit your engagement, need your engagement; they will only ever be half a work without you. Looking at an artwork entails

embarking on an emotional and analytical journey. We are actually rather good at leaving what we *know* behind to enter into other spaces: it's much easier for us to see a metal ring that seems to hover in space than to see it as a half-ring attached to an expansive mirror that reflects it to create the illusion of a perfect metal circle suspended in mid-air [*Wishes versus wonders*, 2015]. We are open to the impossible; we readily enter its territory.

Should we talk about Iceland?

—The Icelandic landscape is like a laboratory for me. It's where I became conscious of how I exercise my senses. It's where I first had to evaluate how I orient myself, to think about tools for navigation and perception. The landscape is extraordinary! It really challenges your brain to make sense of it. If you're standing still it becomes entirely abstract, since there are no trees, cows, cars, or any other recognizable points of reference. By walking you start to render space and scale in your brain, and this creates an acute sense of presence. In Iceland you learn that a waterfall that appears to be falling slowly is, in fact, further away than one where the water is tumbling rapidly down. A waterfall can be a distance-calculating device. So I was trained early on to calibrate myself to the landscape by moving through it – connecting the feeling of time passing with the unfolding of the terrain, composing my own felt map. Movement is really sense-making.

You've said 'a good artwork can reflect the emotional needs of the viewer'. Does the Icelandic landscape have that same capacity?

—You might say so, yes. My relationship with the Icelandic landscape has also influenced my understanding of architecture. The landscape reflects my way of sensing it; it allows me to experience my experience of it. Reading a landscape is both practical and emotional. It's as much about inner pathfinding as about physical pathfinding. To be frank, I'm not one to swoon when I reach the peak of a mountain. The sublime is lost on me – I rarely stop to take in a view fully. The path to the top and the descent that follows are, to me, both just as important as the peak. No moment is privileged as being more important.

Iceland also means childhood memories to you.

—I grew up in Denmark, but primarily spent the summers with my family and father in Iceland. He was an artist and a cook on a trawler, and I'd tag

along when he and Gunnar [Örn Gunnarsson], who was also an artist and a family friend, would set out on rambles through the landscape. They'd go out sketching and painting, and they'd talk about the moss and the stones and get lost in the various reds and browns and greens. Their artistic toolbox was often mythological and narrative-driven. They'd see trolls' faces in the sides of the mountains. When I was about twelve, I did a painting of the rocky expanses of the Almannagjá gorge in Thingvellir: all the stones had noses and mouths and eyes – to make my father and Gunnar happy, I guess. I grew up surrounded by art that embraced both abstraction and mythology and allowed plenty of space for imagination.

What changed your perspective?

—As a teenager I became very interested in street-dance culture and was active on the Scandinavian breakdance scene. Using my body in the urban landscape brought new perspectives to my relationship with Iceland and also had consequences for how I think of architecture and space – the embodied perspective championed by street dance is crucial here. At that time I was also reading a series of books published by the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, especially Jean Baudrillard; later I'd move on to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Henri Bergson. One book was seminal – Lucy Lippard's *The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. This book started my thinking about ephemeral phenomena, about how to dematerialize the artwork and re-frame it as a set of relations. It also led me to more fully acknowledge the body's potential for action in space. I got to know the work of artists from the American West Coast who were part of the Light and Space movement, in particular Robert Irwin and James Turrell – their work unexpectedly reactivated my relationship with the Icelandic landscape.

What is Iceland for you today?

—I guess the most radical change is that I used to think of nature as being infinitely larger than me – it seemed independent of me but also caring. It held me. But today nature has become fragile. The glaciers that I knew as a child are disappearing. We are now living in the Anthropocene, a geological era characterized by the effects of human activity on the earth. It has become apparent that the consequences of our ways of living are destabilizing the climate, and I have become more aware of the responsibility I have towards the earth – the responsibility we all have.

How does your brain work?

—I really can't isolate objects or thoughts or people. My inability to see an object outside its context sometimes makes me feel that I must have some kind of attention deficit disorder – if you look at it within a narrow definition of normality. But actually this is also a strength. My thinking is process-oriented. I think in systems, in networks, in aggregates, and I define objects through the consequences they have in the world. I look not just at a thing but also at its potential for creating action. I take in an object by looking at it from all sides, at once or over time. I like spheres – they have no front and no back. They're non-directional. The vast majority of what I do takes the circle or the ellipse or the sphere as its point of departure. And I like other single-surface objects: doughnuts, ovoids, Möbius strips. I always see things and people in motion.

It's similar when I work on shaping a space or an exhibition: I'm curious about how an institution welcomes its visitors, for instance. Is it a good host? It has to perform an act of double hospitality – towards the visitors and towards the artworks. What spatial constraints does the museum's architecture present? What values does it believe in? These are some of the aspects I look at; they inevitably inform the artworks and the exhibition. There's a lot of projection going on in the development phase: How do we imagine visitors moving from one work to the next? What types of experiences will they bring with them, and how will these experiences co-determine what they see next? An exhibition has a texture, an atmosphere. It's like a small weather system: you enter it, are enveloped, live through the questions that that particular atmosphere asks, and leave it again – retaining, I hope, some trace or feeling of what you passed through. I treasure the fact that you cannot quantify atmosphere – I feel more at ease in the non-quantifiable.

How do you stay inspired?

—It certainly doesn't happen by itself. Inspiration arises through the quality of my interaction with the world. Feeling inspired is, for me, feeling present – which isn't about centredness. I feel no centre of my being. Presence is decentralized. It's everywhere at the same time, glowing. It is like a thin film that covers everything, like soapy water. And suddenly I feel all the details of a given situation at one and the same time. It creates a sense of co-existence, like a school of fish taking cues from each other when swimming, or a swarm of birds in flight. This inter-sensory mode is crucial to me.

Your studio team in Berlin numbers about 100 people. Thinking and creativity are truly networked for you.

—Listening to the team's ideas and observations makes my own stand out more clearly. If Myriam [Thomas], say, or someone in her team comes up with a way of producing a particular work, I push back or agree depending on the options they present. Or if Caroline [Eggel] has an opinion about how to curate the sequence of works in an exhibition, I rub it against my own intuition – I test her felt feeling against mine.

It's about precision. I have a big team because it helps me get more precise in my thinking – and to get inspired, of course. And I rely on them because they are experts in their fields. I've worked with many team members for more than a decade, which is a pretty unique situation. There is an incredible amount of knowledge, problem-solving skill, trust, innovative thinking, and aesthetic sensitivity accumulated here. Inspiration often arises through working with the members of the studio – surrounded by materials, models, visions, an atmosphere of potentiality. I generally yearn to set things in motion, to grapple with new stuff.

When you work in the studio, what tells you when an artwork is done?

—Making an artwork is a ping-pong process. I am most present at the beginning and towards the end and for some other crucial steps; I trust the team to move ahead between these moments of contact and mutual deliberation. A work is done when we cannot add something to or remove something from it without it becoming less precise. It's about finding a balance between the form and the idea. An imprecise artwork will relate awkwardly to its surroundings – making it didactic or banal – whereas a precise work heightens our relationship to our surroundings, whether natural, built, or social. There are also influences from outside – the conditions that a potential site offers, the local partners and their aspirations and modes of working, flexibility, mutual trust. There's risk involved. Sometimes the team and I have to make decisions before the ground has been cleared.

One challenge in doing large-scale installations is that I have to stop working on the piece before I get to see it. With *The weather project* (2003) or *Reality projector* (2018), for instance, I encountered the final work at almost the same time as the first visitors. I don't have the comfort that a painter, for example, has of seeing the final painting in his or her studio – I first get to evaluate whether the work actually functions as I intended alongside the viewers.

Are there works of yours that you particularly like?

—I'd say the works that react to how you move around them. They make you aware of your own movement, and they show that there is no spatial hierarchy since they have no central perspective that organizes your gaze and dictates your experience of the artwork. This is true of most of my works actually, but there are differences in the ways the works make your movement explicit. You experience this in *Your rainbow panorama* (2011) or *Beauty* (1993), for instance. Then there are works, like *Room for one colour* (1997) and *Your strange certainty still kept* (1996), that confront you with the horizon of your own gaze.

Another artwork that I work really hard on getting out into the world is my Little Sun lamp. Little Sun is both a social business and a foundation. I started the project in 2012 with a friend, Frederik Ottesen, because we both fervently believe in bringing energy to people who live off the electrical grid. Little Sun Original and Little Sun Diamond are unlimited artworks – small, simple objects designed to provide light for kids to study at night and to reduce the health hazards related to the use of kerosene. Light is essential to everything people do and, as an artist who's always worked with light, I'm very committed to creating access to sustainable, clean light.

The social aspect of art seems to have grown increasingly important to you.

—Solitary encounters with art are rare, yet art history has focused entirely on that unique, individualized moment. The theory of art reception has only recently moved to consider collective experiences as well. The fact that about 15,000 people moved past *Your sense of unity* (2016) each day when I showed it in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles inevitably became a part of the artwork. *The weather project* (2003) at Tate Modern was almost always a group experience; the presence of numerous visitors gave space and volume to the work. *Green light – An artistic workshop* (2016), which has been hosted in locations as diverse as Vienna, Houston, Venice, and Yokohama, is inherently social because it is made by the participants in the workshop. It is about worlds meeting and participants from different backgrounds addressing together the challenging questions of migration today.

Sharing a space with art can make you conscious that each of the people with whom you share the space is having a unique experience of the work,

without regarding these other views as counterproductive to the quality of your own experience. It is rather an opportunity to embrace diversity as a means of exploring your relationship with others. There's something profoundly democratizing going on here.

You've become interested in what you call 'we-ness'. Why?

—We are – all of us – always part of social systems and simultaneously co-producers of those systems. It's therefore important to ask ourselves: Do these systems allow us to feel our own actions and their consequences? Do we feel like a part of civic society? I'm generally very keen on doing works in public space, because this allows me to reflect, together with the space's other users, on what public space is and on who defines it. I see my pedestrian bridge *Cirkelbroen* (Circle bridge, 2015) in Copenhagen as a contribution to this discussion. It leads to questions of 'we-ness': what is the size of our 'we' – is it primarily local? National? European? This question is very present in Europe these days, linked as it is to migration and to the polarizing tendencies in our societies. I believe in Europe, but I recognize that the EU hasn't made itself present as an entity that people want to identify with – it simply lacks a compelling narrative. I do think culture and art have the ability to address this lack – to discover models for engagement and communication that may help to inspire us.

You've worked with scientists since the beginning of your career. What attracts you to that kind of collaboration?

—It's really about inspiration, about exploring different models of perception, different ways of 'world-making'. Science addresses the need to grasp the impossible within the framework of the possible, to make the invisible visible. It models the as-yet un-modelled. I like looking at how an astrophysicist creates models for understanding outer space, at how an anthropologist sets up an experiment and what that says about our systems for producing knowledge, at the geometries a mathematician works with and what they do to our world view, at how social-neuroscientific research into compassion can be relevant to art-making, at how our models of the world shape our interaction with the world and how they instigate critical inquiries and change. Science, the humanities, and the cultural sector have a responsibility to reflect on such topics, especially as our society is short on critical reflection in general.

From a broader perspective, what is the potential of art?

—The potential lies not so much in the artwork itself as in the encounter between artwork and viewer and world. The way I see it, there's something profoundly inclusive about looking at and being with art. Art isn't bossy; it doesn't tell us what to think or do. It speaks to our not-yet-verbalized emotions and connects us with thoughts and situations from which we may have felt disconnected. It trusts our ability to make sense of its propositions and trusts itself to be a fierce and relevant tool in our lives. Art calibrates our internal compass. It questions and sharpens our ethical and social values, adding a dimension of critical self-reflection to society. It offers a space, free of external interests, that you can claim as your own.

STUDIO OLAFUR ELIASSON

Founded in 1994, Studio Olafur Eliasson initially comprised a handful of people working with Eliasson in a loft on Rungestrasse, Berlin – which was also where he lived. In 2003 the studio moved to a former railway depot on Invalidenstrasse next to the Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart (Museum of contemporary art). By 2008, having grown to nearly fifty people, the studio moved to its current location: the four floors of a converted nineteenth-century brewery complex called Pfefferberg. The building includes wood and metal workshops, a large space for installation tests, offices, an archive, a library, and a kitchen that provides the studio team with daily vegetarian meals and works to promote sustainable healthy cooking.

During Eliasson's tenure as a professor at the Universität der Künste Berlin (Berlin University of the Arts) from 2009 to 2014, the second floor of the building housed the Institut für Raumexperimente (Institute for Spatial Experiments). An archive of the institute's activities can be found at raumexperimente.net.

Today more than one hundred team members work with Eliasson to conceive, design, plan, produce, and disseminate artworks, commissions, built environments, publications, and films. This range of projects requires a diverse range of skills: the studio team includes craftsmen, specialized technicians, architects, designers, geometry experts, archivists, art historians, researchers, filmmakers, cooks, communications specialists, and administrators.

The studio's projects are carried out by a design team led by Sebastian Behmann, an exhibition team led by Caroline Eggel, a research and communications team led by Anna Engberg-Pedersen, a finance team led by Anja Gerstmann, and a development and production team led by Myriam Thomas. Dialogue across all teams and with Eliasson is essential to the studio's ongoing research projects and the development of artistic ideas, exhibitions, and designs. In 2017 the studio published *Studio Olafur Eliasson: Open House, TTT (Take Your Time), Vol. 7*, a collective self-portrait.













