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## Mediating Experience: A conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Luca Cerizza, Berlin, 6 July 2009

Luca Cerizza: I'd like to begin this conversation with a personal memory. The first time we met was back in 1997. As a student of the De Appel programme for curators, I invited you to take part in our degree show.<sup>1</sup> A year later, you gave me one of your first catalogues, the book called *Users* (see p. XX). It was a nice, but low-budget publication consisting of photocopies on white and yellow paper, published in an edition of 400. A decade later, Taschen published a spectacular encyclopedia dedicated to your work. In the course of those ten years, more than forty-five books have been dedicated to you, covering many different typologies of printed matter. I don't think any living artist has produced so many books and my first question is therefore very simple: how did it happen?

Olafur Eliasson: In a way, it's something of a paradox. I went to art school in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and at that time an abundance of very traditional catalogues were being produced with the purpose of solidifying the position of the artist as early as possible. Typically, they'd document the work, show some close-ups and perhaps a few installation shots. They'd also include an essay by the curator, probably one by the director of the museum, and then, of course, an interview with the artist. These catalogues simply filled up every possible space of one's brain in a very standard kind of way. But being young and uncertain and interested in the dematerialisation of the art object, I realised that the worst thing for me would be to have a book consolidate my work within a fixed context or tradition. I was afraid that my work would be misconceived because art history, at least to my knowledge, was very formal at the time and insisted on a kind of objectivity that I was very sceptical of. So for quite a while – inspired a bit by the Light and Space movement on the American West Coast – I avoided making a catalogue. I liked the fact that stories and information about my work could be shared from mouth to mouth.

Eventually, it became important for me that people would be able to use the books to talk about my work with others – in this way, a book would suddenly become a vehicle that could transmit and generate information but also produce interpretations and experiences. I am, anyway, more interested in imagery, in sketches and drawings than in representational photographs of my work. The first book I actually made, a catalogue for the exhibition *The curious garden* at Kunsthalle Basel (see p. XX) in 1997, didn't show the work I presented there. It did, however, include a visual essay. I thought about it as an accordion book, and I developed the essay laying the pictures out in a long line, touching each other like a film sequence. I'd probably have chosen a leporello format myself, but in the end we settled for a more standard book design. The book received a little support from the Danish Contemporary Art Foundation and I was so ambitious that I insisted on spending all the money to get the art-historian Jonathan Crary to write, even though he hadn't even seen my work at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Seamless*, de Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 3 April–1 June, 1998.

Remarkably, this particular essay turned out to touch on just about everything I've since been interested in. Perhaps Crary simply intuited what was to come! It's so close to my work trajectory that we had it reprinted in a catalogue for a group show only last year.

LC: Then I was very lucky, because that was the first text I read about your work. It's interesting to notice how both the Basel catalogue and *Users* are focused not on the actual works of art and their display in an exhibition, but on what's 'around' them, in terms of both visual and theoretical references. I'm wondering if the making of a catalogue is, for you, also an instrument of the theoretical reflection that takes place before and after the exhibition?

OE: I actually use articles and papers, essays and entire books a lot in my work. I've always read, although I'm not a very learned person. Over the years, I've collected many books about spatial principles and by now I have a big library. A short essay can inspire me for several months – after ten lines, I can have ten new ideas if the text is good. The majority of the books are about spatial theory, architecture, or social geography, but I also buy books on other subjects and use them in my own pragmatic way. I often have twenty open at the same time and flip through them, looking for a particular drawing that has relevance for what I'm working on at the moment, like, for instance, weaving patterns and furniture design from the Arts & Crafts Movement. It could also be the French visionary architect Claude Parent's classic *Vivre a l'oblique* from 1970, in which he champions living on inclined surfaces rather than on horizontal planes, or 1960s books on robotics and the first experiments with artificial intelligence. I actually just ordered a new book, inspired by a lecture that Peter Weibel gave a couple of weeks ago: a book on Ruth Vollmer, a Jewish artist whose sculptures were based on mathematical formulas.

I guess the fear of being misconceived that I mentioned at some point turned into a wish to support a certain way of verbalising my work, surrounding it with texts, not just to protect it from art history, but to keep it open, also to myself, and to avoid too conclusive catalogues. To achieve this I've worked with a few great writers – some of them have followed my work over many years, and I've followed theirs, of course. There's Doreen Massey, for instance, who's written in a couple of catalogues, or Daniel Birnbaum, Madeleine Grynsztejn, Ina Blom, Molly Nesbit ... I've also done a lot of interviews with Hans Ulrich Obrist (see p. xx / bibliography). These textual exchanges and expansions of my practice in words are incredibly important to me, and I've tried to give a sense of this in the text collage that will be printed in this book (see pp. xx). It consists of some of my favourite quotes on favourite topics by some of my favourite writers. And I try to respond to a few of their thoughts – often feeling very inadequate in my own dealings with words!

LC: For an artist like you, whose work has deep kinetic and time-based characteristics and aims to involve the viewer in a phenomenological experience, documenting the artwork in printed matter could be quite a frustrating experience. Nevertheless, you seem comfortable with this medium. I'm wondering what your relation is to the language of art books and how you try to overcome its limitations?

OE: You're right, it's seemingly counterintuitive to try to depict the ephemeral materials that many of my works are made of – their temporal qualities and relativity. However, I think this opposition builds on a false premise: the artwork and the art book are often polarised into authenticity and representation, respectively, but I don't think it's possible to distinguish that clearly. You can stand in a space with nothing but colours in it and, despite the absence of a depictable object, have an experience that's very representational. And also the opposite is possible.

Maybe one could say that the art book, often using language as a tool, is more interpretive, whereas the artwork is more experiential, but this is also not entirely true, since experience is deeply rooted in language. The polarisation of representation and authenticity can be overturned as soon as you realise that there's always a degree of representation in an artwork, and a book can attain the same level of physical and emotional performativity as an artwork. I should maybe add that my production of books has also been driven by the fact that many of my works are large-scale installations or architectural projects that require one or two years of laboratorial and investigative work. The development of works like *Your mobile expectations: BMW H<sub>2</sub>R project* [2008] and the information gathered in the research process is simply best documented in the book as a medium (see pp. XX).

Working with museum institutions, I always insist that the catalogue, to some extent at least, should be considered a work of art in the exhibition even though it might only be published afterwards. Of course, this doesn't always work out: *Your Lighthouse: Works with Light 1991–2001* (see p. XX), a chronologically organised catalogue for my exhibition in Wolfsburg in 2004,<sup>2</sup> is maybe the most conventional book I've been involved in so far. Art historically speaking, the most important one – and a very ambitious project – was the SFMOMA catalogue, published on the occasion of *Take your time*, which travelled to MoMA and P.S.1 in New York and onwards.<sup>3</sup> It includes some really wonderful texts, but perhaps this catalogue fails to reconsider its relationship to its own representational frame of reference.

If I seem quite familiar with the book as medium, it's probably because I've never really thought about the book as a book, but rather as a work of art. I approach an art book and an artwork in the same way: first I ask *why* I'm challenging this artistic problem, and when I have a feeling or an intuition of the *why*, I start to consider *how*. This is why I never think of a book as giving a secondary experience.

LC: What you say about mediating experience is very interesting, since your work questions the relation between the primary and secondary, the 'original' and the 'mediated' experience of phenomena. So, is the book a continuation of this approach in another medium? Do you imagine the book as a spatial tool? How can the non-linear movement that most of your works require be translated in the linear space of the book? How can the dynamics of your work be transmitted into the (rather) static format of the book?

OE: 'The book as a spatial tool' – that's really interesting. My books typically differ from, say, a novel, in that they're anchored in a concrete space or location, usually a social experiment, a symposium, or a museum exhibition. This means that there's a degree of recognition in the book. The reader might say: 'Oh, I saw that, I was there', and suddenly the book becomes a trace of a physical memory. On top of that, I've worked a lot on the spatial language of books with the two very talented main graphic designers that I collaborate with, Michael Heimann and Andreas Koch. In *Your House* (see pp. xx) for instance, I, together with Michael, devised a dimensional language that was very much about movement and time, using computer modelling and our spatial imagination. The book really *is* spatial itself. I was in part inspired by *Flatland*, a great little book by Edwin A. Abbott that came out in the late nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> and we used an excerpt from it in the prospectus that was produced to

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<sup>2</sup> *Your lighthouse: Works with light 1991–2004*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 28 May–4 September, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 8 September, 2007–13 January 2008. Travelled to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Queens, USA, Dallas Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA. Continues to Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, 16 December 2009–11 April, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Seely & Co., 1884).

communicate *Your House*. It's about going from two to three to four dimensions – it's a very funny but spatially challenging book.

LC: Your practice is highly concerned with the role of the viewer/participant in front of the work, about his/her active response. How do you imagine this possible in the format of the book? How would you eventually encourage this active participation in this medium?

OE: I think one shouldn't isolate the book from the performativity of reading it. And one shouldn't underestimate the reader's ability to make sense of the content. In a way, you're physically active when reading: you flip through the pages, go back and forth, feel the haptic qualities of the paper and the cover in your hands and so on. The funny thing is that the book has a very pragmatic way of depicting time: on the left side of the spine, you find what you've already looked at, and on the right, what you're about to see. Like in your brain, there's a short-term memory of what you've just experienced and a short-term expectation of what you're about to see, and in this way, the book also creates a 'now'. In *Your Engagement has Consequences* (see p. XX) I played with the fact that the 'now' only exists in the collaborative performativity of the book with the reader: the sequence of wave images and drawings only 'works' when the reader actually flips through the pages.

LC: Going to more practical aspects, I'd like to know how you normally approach an editorial project. Do you find a direction for a specific publication and then look for the appropriate graphic designer and publisher, or how does it work? I'd like to understand how Studio Olafur Eliasson organises the production of a publication.

OE: At my studio in Berlin, I have a little archive and publication team consisting of art historians and other people with editorial experience. We're in the luxurious position of doing a lot, but not too much, so we take the time to work with a high focus on detail. I say this because some publishing houses let the quality deteriorate simply because of time pressure. Another – and greater – advantage of producing publications in-house is that the team is integrated within my studio and they participate in quite a bit of the studio work. Apart from developing publications, they, for example, write small presentation texts for architectural projects or prepare image presentations for lectures. They also archive written and visual material, handle press, and so on. Archival and editorial work is really part of the daily studio life. We also constantly collect, buy and distribute books. And of course my team think with me about why these books are interesting. On top of that, they're pretty sensitive to the thought that I'm trying not to be too conclusive about my work and they're good at crystallising my ideas. I often have a strong sense about how I want a book to look, but not a very strong sense of how to get there.

LC: How do you select or approach a graphic designer?

OE: Actually, I'd often really like to do the graphic design myself. I love sitting with the graphic designers, evaluating whether the text should be more to the right or to the left – but I've learned that they're simply better at it. Since 2002, I've worked with Michael Heimann and Andreas Koch, as well as his collaborator Stefan Stefanescu. They each have very specific skills and, of course, I always think about this when considering who would be just right for the publication I have in mind – who can communicate or transmit the project in the best possible way. The last time I used another graphic designer for one of the in-house publications was on the Venice Biennale catalogue in 2003 (see p. XX). I worked with a very good and established bureau called cyan, but the book ended up being very different from my work: its strong graphic statement

essentially deviated from some of the artistic tenets I believe in. Knowing the graphic designers personally therefore means a lot to me.

LC: Let's look in more detail into some of your books. I'd like to ask you something about a couple of publications that have the characteristics of a compendium, not addressing your work directly, but the sphere of interests it raises. It seems to me that this approach goes as far back as *Users*. But I'm especially thinking of books like *Surroundings Surrounded: Essays on Space and Science*, edited by Peter Weibel for the ZKM and published in 2002 (see p. XX), and *Life in Space 3* (see p. XX). The latter documents the last symposium in your Studio, held in May 2008, with the presence of a large number of guests from different fields, discussing the relativity of light and colour. I'd like to know what the aim of these publications is in the light of the recent opening of a class of UdK students inside your Studio building and your interest in education.

OE: The catalogue for *Surroundings surrounded*, my first larger solo exhibition,<sup>5</sup> was inspired by a book I'd noticed already in art school called *Incorporations*,<sup>6</sup> edited by Sanford Kwinter and Jonathan Crary. Reading this book, I became familiar for the first time with the idea that one could put a text by a philosopher like Gilles Deleuze next to an essay by, say, a bioengineer. Juxtaposing texts from many different fields of research creates what we could call 'productive friction' – clashes, in a way. *Incorporations* traces a field of spatial inquiry that's extremely heterogeneous, but still coheres in some very interesting basic questions about our way of being in the world, our embodied being. *Surroundings Surrounded* was an attempt to map all the different and sometimes paradoxical ideas that I work with – and to map the time in which my work was made. None of the texts directly mention my artworks; rather, they voice related themes. The only way my work is directly presented in the book is in 'slices' of a visual essay that runs through it. The photographs are placed so that they continue on the following page; in other words, one can only see them in the flux of flipping from one page to the next. The funny thing is that we're now, almost ten years later, playing with the idea of doing the same book, only using new texts, a *Surroundings Surrounded Surrounded*. I wish I could have arranged a symposium for *Surroundings Surrounded* and invited all the people who contributed to the catalogue. The next book you mentioned, *Life in Space 3*, is a documentation of exactly such a symposium, and conceptually, it's going from the book backwards into the physical event.

LC: Did you have an educational aim with *Surroundings Surrounded* or was it rather a tool for yourself, for the understanding of your own work?

OE: My wife Marianne [Krogh Jensen] was writing a PHD in architectural theory at the time, and she introduced me to a lot of the theorists that she was researching. It was a period of my life in which texts as a means of translation from idea into matter were very important. From a feeling or intuition I could crystallise or materialise a theoretical argument – the text would work as a short-cut for my brain, in a sense. I guess *Surroundings Surrounded* in a way began what has now also become an educational project: the Institut für Raumexperimente. We're doing a programme with the students with all kinds of people coming in to talk to them and to present their experiments and research. Ute Meta Bauer from MIT has been here, and we've had Luc Steels, who's a specialist in robotics and language development, Ernst Pöppel, a brain researcher, Steen Kørner, who's a choreographer and slow-motion expert and so on. It's

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<sup>5</sup> *Surroundings surrounded*, Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria, 1 April–21 May, 2000. Travelled to *Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, Germany*.

<sup>6</sup> *Incorporations*, eds Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

in a way a live version of the book. Every workshop or discussion is being documented, and we'll be making this material public on our website shortly. As time passes, I think we'll have an incredible online archive, and eventually – maybe in five years' time – it could be compiled into a kind of mega-book.

LC: This conversation introduces a book that's a sort of experiment in an editorial field. The aim is to process your books into a new creature: a sort of third-grade documentation. What do you think will come out of this process?

OE: I think you're like a DJ who samples a lot of old music. Hopefully there will be a fresh beat in it that can re-activate some of the old tunes in a different manner! Clearly, the books won't work exactly the same way today as they did when they were published, but some of them will probably find another relevance. I hope this retroactive experience will make contemporary books out of the old ones – it's anyway great to get the chance to dip into this old material. There seems to be so much potential collected. Maybe this book is also a kind of biography – or almost an autobiography, written through printed material. Looking back as we do here is also a way of looking ahead. It will generate ideas for new books – and maybe even new ways of doing books.