

Take your time: A conversation

Olafur Eliasson and Robert Irwin

Olafur Eliasson: I've really looked forward to talking with you, because we seem to share certain interests—in temporality, for instance. Temporality is one of the few elements of my artistic practice that keeps growing in both meaning and implication, and what I particularly value in your work is the way in which you try to do justice to temporality by ascribing greater value to relativity. I believe that devoting attention to time has far reaching consequences for the idea of objecthood and the dematerialization of the object. Artworks are not closed or static, and they do not embody some kind of truth that may be revealed to the spectator. Rather, artworks have an affinity with time—they are embedded in time, they are of time. This is why I sometimes call my works experimental setups; they are structures with which visitors can engage.

The value we ascribe to these unstable and unpredictable structures is much more relative than what we encounter in the experience industry as we know it today. A focus on temporality can become a threat to this industry, I think. Your work and mine are being disseminated by a type of experience industry called museums, which have more or less consciously taken it upon themselves to create a sense of timelessness in the objects they display. And they do this on our behalf.

Robert Irwin: But if they do, and we do let them do it, we're making a big mistake.

OE: Exactly. That is why I have decided to call the exhibition *Take your time*. Taking one's time means to engage actively in a spatial and temporal situation, either within the museum or in the outside world. It requires attention to the changeability of our surroundings. You could say that it heightens awareness of the fact that our actions have a specific speed, depending on the situation. The question is whether such temporal engagement is supported by society as well as by museums. Often the answer is no. So I think it is our responsibility as artists to challenge the shape of the museum, since museums claim to communicate the values of society.

RI: The museum is an old, old model that was set up essentially to deal with objects. You and I are not object makers; we're dealing with experiential processes. The museum structure is geared toward a particular kind of art making, which represents a particular set of values. What we're proposing is another set of values. Museums have to respond to that in kind. Right now there is no methodology to deal with the phenomenal in art.

OE: I first became interested in phenomenology when I was an art student, as it seemed to offer a means for understanding subjectivity and the ways in which one could engage with one's surroundings. But I have sensed a danger in phenomenology's being presented as a kind of truth; there's a tendency to detach experience from social context by justifying it as a phenomenological situation. And it is a more dynamic conception of phenomenology, of course, that has been a source of inspiration in my work. To me the greatest potential of phenomenology lies in the idea that subjectivity is always susceptible to change. I like to think that my work can return criticality to the viewer as a tool for negotiating and reevaluating the environment—and that this can pave the way for a more causal relationship with our surroundings. Whereas earlier decades looked to phenomenology as a sort of formula that constitutes our surroundings, I think the 1990s showed that it can instead be a tool for negotiating these surroundings. It offers an inquisitive, explorative approach to the world that allows for multiple perspectives on artworks, subjectivity, and experience.

RI: When I was starting out I had a similar problem. In the sixties, when my paintings were acting out their own demise, I had the idea that nonobjective was going to translate as

nonobject—i.e., purely phenomenal—but that was a red herring. While the same reasoning that had moved us away from a pictorial reality—from pictorial to phenomenal—applied equally to the realm of objects, it had nothing to do with object/nonobject; it had to do with how we see the object in context. Once you realize this, you've put yourself in a place in which everything is understood in sets of conditions. There may be such a thing as a universal or "high" art—it's certainly a pretty idea—but it's not the reality of our everyday world. In fact, everything is subject to fluctuating sets of conditions that in themselves are not static, and this dynamic of a world of qualities is the stuff of real-time perception.

OE: I agree.

RI: I try to deal with all those conditions. I'm also wrestling with the history of modern art. The big move is when we eliminate abstract references to art history, and the person walking through the work doesn't have to know anything about you or art. That puts it on the most immediate social level, because the observer's referencing the same cues you are. It's no longer an abstract referencing, it's an experiential one. Which is what I mean by phenomenological: it's made in real time.

We're in this funny spot right now—we've got one foot in museums, but philosophically we also have one foot over here. The game we're playing is riddled with contradictions—the world isn't going to change just because you and I feel this way.

Basically, we're making things that may have implications for change. But we have to deal with the idea of the museum as a forum. The museum is a representation of a moment in time, and it eventually becomes a historical model. That's the natural evolution of museums. When a collection grows, the museum may end up showing incredible art—there's nothing wrong with that—but it doesn't maintain its position as an open forum. What we're asking the museum to be is a forum for dialogue in which we can exercise just what we're doing right now. A museum can do that, generally, for only a very short period of time. We participate anyway, because that's how we interface as artists and work out the issues of being artists. But at the same time, in doing so, we actually compromise the critical point.

OE: I don't think a museum must be either a collection or a forum. If you take the ideas we've just discussed and apply them to the museum, its collection can become a forum—that is, a platform for discussion. I do think there's a way, and I have great faith in the spectator and in the self-reflective experience.

RI: Well, you and I are both optimists of the first order! But I have not seen any museum maintain its focus or commitment to acting as a forum. Twice I tested the parameters of the museum. The first time I was ever asked to do an installation, it was in 1970 and strangely enough at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jenny Licht, a very special woman, called me out of the blue and said she had an empty room I could play with. Unfortunately, she said, because the museum hasn't programmed it, there is no money and nobody can assist you, but would you be interested? I, of course, said yes, and then she told me I would have to do most of my work at night when the museum was closed.

To say the least, it was a difficult task . . . pug-ugly little room next to a gallery filled with Brancusi sculptures. So now I am in there at night and I don't know how or what I'm going to do, and I have to walk in and out looking at these Brancusis, which are absolutely brilliant. What I finally did [pl. 21] was very simple—so simple as to be on the verge of nonexistent. The one feature of the room was a deep-set, slotted skylight the length of the space, with five corresponding lines of fluorescent lights set well up in the slot and an old-fashioned egg-crate light filter (two inches deep) flush with the surface. First, I cleaned the skylight of years of scum. Then I changed out every other line of fluorescents so they alternated warm and cool, and the egg-crate filter fractured the light into very subtle bands of light-dark warm-cool rainbows throughout the room. I then added a partial, translucent scrim ceiling to reportion the room and float the rainbows of light in space. Add a disembodied stainless-steel line that suspended the eye in space, and you got a wonderful sense of color and

space, seemingly without a source. Now mind you, MoMA did not acknowledge, announce, or write about it. And yet in the end they insisted on institutionalizing it by putting a label on it. Of course, the minute you do this you automatically qualify it as “art,” and in turn this usurps the role I have created for the observer: Is it there? Is it finished? How do I feel about it? Is it art? So I hired a kid to remove the label each day. In the short term this work resulted in a series of small installations lasting only as long as Jenny Licht did . . . but in the end the Modern hasn’t been the Modern in years.

Later, in 1977, I was asked to do a retrospective by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Instead I took the opportunity to ask (and act out) a proposition. If you ask the question “If perception is the pure subject of art, can we hold the dialogue for art to be the equal of making?” the answer is no. To make a long story short, to exercise this proposition I did a series of works—and a series of observations outside the museum—that in effect dissolved the walls of the museum as context and posited making as nonessential. But in the end the institution simply acted as if that part never existed. They don’t even know that they own the whole thing, figuratively speaking. You know, it’s like veils. I tell you something, and then I tell you something else; the more I do that, the less you’re able to see.

OE: Only the veil metaphor is problematic, because it seems to suggest that art lies behind the veils. What is special in the case of conditional experience is, I think, what I sometimes call the introspective quality of seeing: you see whatever you’re looking at, but you also see the way you’re seeing. You can find pleasure or fear in what you’re experiencing, but your experience of the thing is integrated as a part of the thing itself.

RI: “Perceiving yourself perceiving” is the phrase I use.

OE: Or “seeing yourself seeing”—I probably took that from you! Anyway, the potential lies in its deconstructive nature. I guess deconstructive is not quite the right word here, but it works: we can consider the surroundings as constructions, not truths.

RI: They’re just conditions.

OE: Right. This implies that the museum has to make its ideology accessible to visitors, but many museums lack the self-criticality to make this happen. And it is not just the art world that is focusing on the quality, nature, and construction of experience—these issues have turned out to be big business in our experience economy. I think these examples are generally much less sophisticated, however, as the experience economy tends to patronize and commodify our feelings and perceptions. Therefore, it’s as important as ever to focus on the self-evaluative quality of experience. This may sound naive, but I think you can apply introspective and self-evaluative tools to any situation—and this ultimately gives you the opportunity to reposition yourself in society.

RI: I share your naivete there. One of the things about being alone in the studio, which a lot of artists are most of the time, is that you sometimes think you have no contact. That you’re not actually doing something in the world, that art is isolated. And that’s a tough illusion to live with. I actually like to think of art and philosophy as being very close together. This explanation is a little simplistic, but it makes the point clearly: I open my eyes in the morning, and the world appears totally formed. I don’t sit there and think about that. I swing my legs around the edge of the bed, and I take the whole world with me— which is an incredibly complex thing to do. Everything appears given—not only given but actually accounted for. I don’t ask myself, “How did I do that?” I just get up and go take a shower. But if I were to lie there for even an instant, two amazing things would be revealed: I would perceive that I actually put it together, and that it is not a given. But if the mind actually had to think about what the body is telling it at every instant, it couldn’t function. Now that just blows my mind. We’ve developed all these canons of philosophy and meaning having to do with the idea of consciousness, awareness, or cognition. But there’s always this conceit that the mind somehow operates in a vacuum. In my view, the history of phenomenology—and, I think,

modern art—is about the introduction of the opposite as an equal player. No hierarchy about the mind being more important than the body. I like to use the term co-arising, which doesn't make either perception or cognition sound more real or important. They're equally dependent and mutually exclusive. And yet, so that we can function, they operate as if they are one. The role of artists is, in a sense, to continually examine what's going on there. Not to be corny, but they step on the other side of that veil.

OE: This is also where feelings come into it. We've always been told that feelings are introverted states. It's curious that so little work has been done on the nature of feelings until recently; cognitive scientists, for example, have begun to focus on them. Our culture promotes a split between the mind and the body, which doesn't allow for an understanding of feeling as an extroverted activity.

RI: Right. A feeling is not just a response, it's an action.

OE: A feeling is a relationship between a mental and a physical state—it implicates both mind and body.

RI: That's what I mean by co-arising.

OE: And the idea that you as perceiver become a producer is the key issue here. You project your feelings onto your surroundings—this is how you relate to them.

RI: That's because values are essentially invested by your feelings. I see something, and by seeing it—attending to it, spending time with it, acting on it—I give it value. And so value is not neutral; once negotiated, it ultimately becomes a piece of you. It can reconstruct how you practice, or how you move in the world. In time, that has the implication of changing the structures around you. But it's a long-term project. The real change that comes from feelings and values has to be seeded, in a sense, and then it begins to act on things—on you, and then on how you make decisions and judgments, and therefore on how you construct the world.

OE: That is really a crucial concept. I have been doing some research on the relativity of white light used in museum spaces, the point being to emphasize the fact that the white cube is a construction. In my Berlin laboratory we have a white room for experiments with different kinds of light based on real-life observations in Reykjavík, Venice, and other cities. You can work in a really detailed way with the color spectrum of white light. Even though I still find the white cube a fairly attractive model to engage with, I think we owe it to the spectators to tell them that this kind of space is embedded in a long history, that it is culturally coded. There are so many things involved in viewing art—that's what makes it such a rich and complex field. How can we consider representation in a productive light? How may we deal with our memories of previous artworks when looking at a new one? All along there has been a hierarchy of the senses that influences the way we experience.

RI: The work I made in the next room here at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego [pl. 22] raises a lot of the questions you've just posed. It's very interesting—the room exists because somebody decided not to wall it up. Why did they leave it? It's a particularly arresting view. I've seen people walk into that gallery and say, "Well now, this is art. This is beautiful." And I've heard other people argue that it should've been walled up. I had no idea what to do at first. I mean, nobody had ever used that room, because it's not very usable—not many walls, and a little too much light, and it's got to compete with this view. So I got the idea of cutting a window. Not bad, but not enough. When I cut the window in the angle of the corners, that really resolved it. Then some interesting things happened that I had not anticipated. One is that the glass being tinted makes the cutout appear to be more in focus . . . add all the sounds and the air and so forth

and it becomes, on a visceral level, more real. Suddenly all these issues about reality and meaning as “real” are all jumbled up. Because the minute you introduce the frame, you’ve introduced the old context of representation. To have the real thing instead of the representation within the frame, you suddenly have to wrestle with the idea of why this is not art.

OE: True, but I would like to suggest that the experience of something representational is not, qualitatively speaking, a less important kind of experience. To me there is nothing nonrepresentational. In art history there seems to be a tendency to insist that the real is better than the representational. I’ve often thought about you when I’ve said that looking at something representational is not about the quality of the experience; it’s about whether the author of that representational image has the guts to acknowledge it’s representational.

RI: Well, here’s something that maybe we should kick around a little bit: the use of the term real. I’m of the opinion that most discussions about reality are not about reality at all—they’re about meaning. I say to you, “The reality of the situation is . . .” and then I give you my point of view. I try to take reality and put it on my side. But there is nothing that’s not real on one level or another. And so it’s never really about reality per se—it’s about this game of meaning. When you have a frame and a representation, that assumes a whole structure of meaning. And when you flatten that out, you’re really having an argument about which of these meaning structures is most significant. The key here— and I think it’s really important—is that it’s not an either/or situation. Modern art, basically, is both/and. Piet Mondrian, for example, lays out a kind of whole new way of seeing. He starts with a subject like a tree and slowly takes it all the way down to the plus/minus paintings—to pure energy. He gives you different ways of seeing the tree. Neither is more real or important than the other, but they give you different realities.

OE: And they say something about each other as well.

RI: Yes. They are, as they say, perfectly complementary. I love the idea of two truths existing simultaneously—or three or four or five. That throws a wrench in the whole works, in a way. It suggests an entirely different idea of social organization. Have you ever heard of a little book by Edwin Abbott called Flatland?

OE: Yes, I know it.

RI: The interesting thing about the book is that having described the rules of Flatland, Abbott introduces the third dimension. The beauty of it is that no matter what happens in the third dimension, there is a two-dimensional explanation for why it is not, in fact, true. Actually, I think that right now we’re wrestling with how to go from a three dimensional model to a four-dimensional one. How do you actually do that? How do you deal with a four-dimensional way of seeing? And what kind of social practice or order will result?

OE: Exactly. I have worked with that as well, and I have several names for it. The most obvious one that comes to mind is the fifth dimension—the fourth being time. It might also be called the dimension of engagement, because it allows for a greater relativity in our understanding of the other three or four dimensions. To emphasize the importance of engagement, I have tried to connect it with temporality by introducing the idea of Your Engagement Sequence, or YES. Any situation or object can be made relative and negotiable if you insist that YES is a necessary component of the perceptual process. We could say that YES destabilizes truth, turning it into an individual experience.

RI: So, adding the observer.

OE: Yes. The key issue is the role of the engaged spectator or user. The question is whether the activities or actions of that user in fact constitute the artwork. Let’s say that without the

participation of the user there is nothing. This is not a new idea, but we need to take it to the point of saying that the user is the source of the artwork. And the psychology—the memories, expectations, moods, and emotions—that a person brings to the work is an important part of it. The word user, by the way, might seem utilitarian, but I find it rather lovely and demystifying. I don't mind considering art in a slightly utilitarian perspective, since we need, I think, to engage more directly with society.

At the end of the 1980s the Light and Space artists were highly inspirational to me, as they really worked with the subject as a projector or producer of the context—as a highly sophisticated and resourceful agent of dematerialization. I first encountered your work, and that of Maria Nordman, through books. I found it really complex and exciting. I was, to be honest, completely shocked, because it seemed so relevant to me. When I saw your 1998 work *Prologue: x18*, [pl. 23] at Dia Center for the Arts, what struck me was that it was about society and identity and subjectivity. The installation was really a part of the city; it was about the spatial questions that one has to resolve every day.

RI: The subject/object thing was something that I stumbled upon, in a way, in the 1960s. Frank Stella was doing his octagonal paintings at that time, with the holes in the center, and I was doing the dot paintings. And he said to me, "Why do you go to all that trouble to fold the canvas under and clean up the edges?" I said, "Because it's there and needs attending. Why don't you?" And he said, "Because it's not important." Wow, that just blew my mind. Somebody presents you with this absolutely clear distinction, and you realize you're talking about two different kinds of seeing. In other words, I look around at the world, and it's loaded with these kinds of frames. But, actually, there are no frames in our perception. It's a continuous envelope in which we move. You realize that framing is a device. If I want to get from here to there, certain pieces of information are critical. So there are things that become focused—framed, in a way—and things that become invisible. I call these structures highly stylized learned logics—which is not to say that they're not real or functional. This is not an either/or proposition—it's both/and. And that's a big difference. Once you allow for the possibility of two kinds of "reality," it changes all the rules of the game. If you break the frame of the painting/object you lose something very critical—the existing cultural agreement. Every mark made on a canvas, for someone conversant with the history of painting, can be weighed with and against the whole history of marks, underwriting a sophisticated and nuanced understanding. Initially when you break the frame you only have the crude question of in/out, since this in/out is a clear issue raised by the radical history of modern thought. The question for the modern artist is not just what would be the extended "frame of reference," but also how would it work.

OE: At least for the time being, the breaking of the frame is the new frame. It might be perpendicular to the old idea of the frame, but it is also a frame.

RI: Well, I suppose it could be structured into one. But for the artist making the initial inquiries, the immediate issue modern art presented to our generation is what would a nonhierarchical structure look like and how would it work. The piece I did at Dia— when I finished it I had a great uneasiness about it; there was something I couldn't put my finger on. I kept going back there, and I finally realized I had something that was a pretty good example of a nonhierarchical structure. I hadn't set out to do that, even though I'd been talking about it for a long time. You could enter the piece from any point; there was no beginning, middle, or end. At every point you had a minimum of eight choices to make, but there was no hierarchy in those choices. And when you left, you found the necessity to go back to it again, because it didn't have handles on it.

OE: It was also nonhierarchical in terms of time. One of the reasons I went back was that not one moment seemed more important than another, which for an artistically organized experience is very unusual.

RI: I very much like the idea that you aren't led through something or told where to go, but instead are given a continuous set of qualitative choices. The choices are not dictatorial in any way. You're the one who has to make them. You're put in this position of actually constructing the aesthetics of the experience as you go, because each time you make a choice you change the nature of the experience.

OE: Yes—this is particularly evident in ephemeral situations. It's very hard for us to classify the ephemeral, but there are interesting ways of probing our individual responses to these situations. For example, I've done a couple of afterimage works using a screen that completely surrounds you. One is called 360° room for all colours [pls. 167–72]. If two people enter at different times, the mixture of the afterimage and the projected light will give each person a different impression of color. If you enter while the screen is blue, your eye will produce an orange afterimage; if I come in while it's green, my eye starts to produce red. But your afterimage is going to fade from orange to red and mine will not. So it's like a little house of individuality. After ten minutes, we may start seeing the same thing, physiologically speaking, but we may still think something different.

RI: You've obviously thought a great deal about interfacing with the observer. I think the thing that's crucial is not having an ambition for them on their behalf—some idea of correctness or meaningfulness.

OE: Yes, I completely agree.

RI: Most of our histories are in fact homogeneous—that is, once our most basic concepts are in place. On the basis of their seeming permanence we can progress in an orderly manner. And like rungs on a ladder we seem to progress upward, replacing or refining one idea with another to gain those wonderful structures we call civilizations. Over time, based on their success, these structures can take on the character of beliefs. The structures that we live in and through permutate into structures that live in and through us. In effect, even though we invented them, at some point we become captives of them. This makes questioning them one of the hardest things a human being can do.

Having said that, the history of modern thought is a radical history. To know this you only need to witness the radical reductions in art through the nineteenth century— attempts to find a place to begin again. The philosopher Edmund Husserl best characterized this process as the need for a phenomenological reduction . . . a going back to the beginning to ask the critical question “How might it be otherwise?” So all the things we're talking about are ways of rethinking this. The shift from object to subject, and from being to circumstance, is right at the heart of the matter. For thirty years, everything I did didn't exist. I love that as a question. I mean, “What do you mean, it doesn't exist?” Let's assume, for a second, that it's art. It challenges the whole idea of how art is dealt with or presented, how it's accumulated, how histories are made. And so you realize that these things have structural, social, critical implications. They ask questions that need to be sorted out by society. It's going to take a long time before we see whether or not it actually works, and how it works, and what kind of social structure it makes, because we're changing all the rules of the game.

At this point we can only speculate about what the results might be.

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