

VII — The vessel interview, part I
NetJets flight from Berlin to Dubrovnik, 2007¹²

Hans Ulrich Obrist — This is the second interview we've done on a plane, but this time the flight is the payment for a project you did for NetJets Europe. Could you tell us more about it? I'm particularly curious because I curated one of my first shows on Austrian Airlines when we invited, together with museum in progress, Alighiero Boetti to do *Cieli ad alta quota* and Andreas Slominski to do *A Flying Carpet* [1994], and it seems that you've designed a flying blanket [*Skyblue versus landscape green*, 2005].

Olafur Eliasson — [*laughs*] Yes, we're in the air right now enjoying NetJets' last payment to me for the little project I did for them. I don't think there's much to be said about it except that it was a blanket—it wasn't

(12) On the way to Francesca von Habsburg, Lopud Conference and opening of Olafur Eliasson's and David Ajaye's *Your black horizon* Art Pavilion, Lopud island, Croatia, June 20–October 31, 2007.

exactly a carpet, but a little blanket that you could wrap around yourself if you were cold.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **On the flight?**

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, but I wonder whether it was actually used on the flight. In any case, to make a long story short, I received an invitation to do a little blanket, and as I've been fascinated by ideas related to arts and crafts, I accepted the commission. Since the support provided to me to do this blanket was more than ample, I was able to design a rather sophisticated blanket, weaving it in many different colors. Part of the payment was the flight we're on now.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **But it's also interesting because it's related to how your studio works. If you recall, you showed me all these different things, such as a fashion line—things from all different kinds of fields, products related to the world of architecture, etc. So, like an architectural or design office, you took on a variety of commissions and started to negotiate with them. And I think this NetJets project is probably part of that section of your studio.**

Olafur Eliasson — Actually, I don't think I'm changing my practice in that sense. The important thing for me is that we remain free to choose the format we want to work in artistically. I feel it's important to be able to take on the challenge of testing artistic ideas in different formats. This is why I've become increasingly interested in investigating whether I can do projects that live out in the real world, which is essentially my view on how artistic ideas should work. I'm also

interested in how a project can work as a piece of clothing—as a raincoat or an umbrella, or as a blanket or an object. So I don't really see it as a change; it's just developed naturally like this.

And as to the rather large projects, there was one for Louis Vuitton [*Eye see you*, 2006] and one for BMW [*Your mobile expectations: BMW H2R project*, 2007]. The interesting thing is that working on those two projects, I entered a circle of people who are normally not working closely with the art world. What I discovered is that they have a completely different language. So although it was an artistic and critical project, it was also a challenge in terms of communication. There's a certain problem of elitism in the art world, in that the language that's spoken simply doesn't have a very broad scope. So I'm interested in reaching out to these other worlds—not just to the world of global economy, but to people who might be interested in an object's meaning.

This all being said, it's important to keep in mind that the BMW and Louis Vuitton projects, together, represented less than five percent of the work going on in my studio—even though roughly seventy-five percent of the exposure I received during that period was related to them. So they were, in fact, small projects in terms of the time it took me to make them, but they were huge in terms of the exposure.

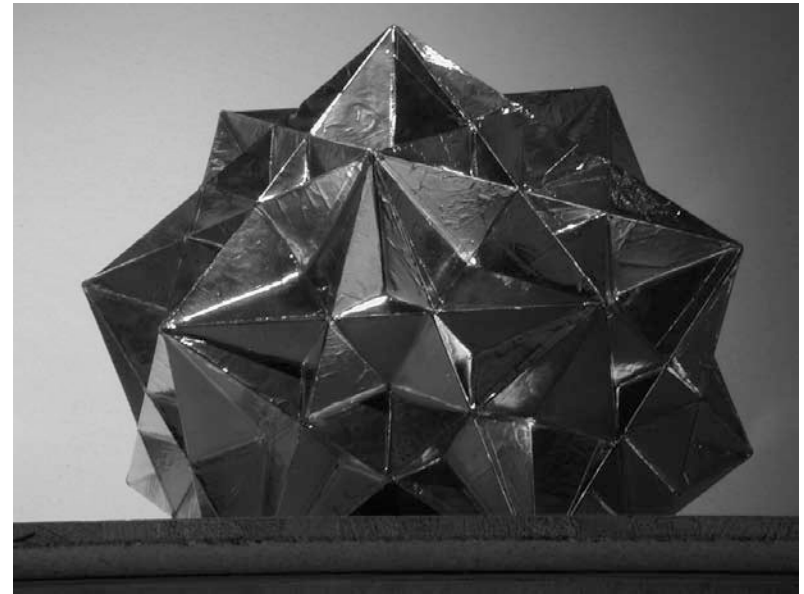
Hans Ulrich Obrist — **The Louis Vuitton project was really a planetary issue in a way because it was displayed in many different cities. They suddenly popped up in all of these windows—**

almost on the same day, I think. It was really like a pop-up—a global pop-up show. So in this sense, it was more like a generic sculpture that could work anywhere. And yet you're also defining another type of circulation in terms of money and the economy, because it helped your foundation. This is interesting because it also entails the idea of artists entering into philanthropy. Jeff Koons initiated a philanthropic foundation for children. Could you tell me more about the sculpture and the economic aspect of the project?

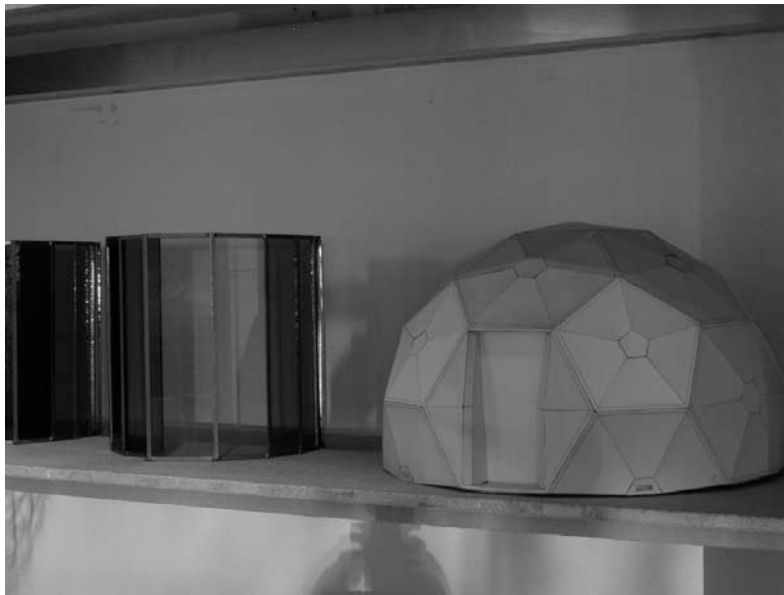
Olafur Eliasson — Yes, the project focused very much on the relationship between what's inside and outside the shop window. It's about the particular intentionalities the two spaces have—the way the luxury goods store projects a value out onto the street and how most people in the street only have access to that value through the glass. My challenge was to make a device or lamp or projector that would illustrate the fact that there's a boundary involved and that the street is the more interesting of the two sides. So I proposed the idea of illuminating the street, or projecting light onto the street, as if it were a stage in a theater.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **Did you do more research on light?**

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, it was similar to a lamp you'd see at the dentist's, where, if you look into it very closely, you see your own reflection. That played a part in the project. Also, I successfully negotiated with Louis Vuitton that there would be no commercial goods in the windows. Considering the fact that the project was during the Christmas season, you can imagine that this was rather radical. But my idea involved a very clear statement.



Models, 2001, installation view at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2001



Models, 2001, installation view at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, Germany, 2001

I wanted it to be an empty window; it was more about the idea of a window than a functioning window. And Louis Vuitton accepted that.

And, finally, yes, it made sense for me to do the project because of a different matter as well—that is, to collect money for philanthropic purposes, pursued by me together with my wife and friends. This is related to the fact that the Louis Vuitton brand is one of the biggest luxury brands in the world; at about the same time, we became involved with an Ethiopian orphanage, which is state run and was probably one of the worst orphanages in the country. This provided me with the opportunity to connect something very, very low—very, very poor and mismanaged—with something very, very high. I was able to give a handshake in Ethiopia and then shake hands with a top, high-end representative of Louis Vuitton all on the same day. This is quite important in terms of raising questions of responsibility today.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Could you tell me more about the foundation? What is its mission, exactly?

Olafur Eliasson — For now, we're working on it as we go along. The main purpose of the foundation is to promote the idea that the way we live should produce some kind of responsible reality. Every week, my wife and I, and the people we involve in this work, contribute two to five percent of what we earn to the foundation. It's almost like a little tax we've placed on ourselves. We are no longer members of the church; in Denmark, the so-called church tax is about one and

a half percent of your income. In Germany it's eight percent, I think. So essentially we tried to find a way for a small percentage of everything we do to go to our foundation. The core issue is to try to find a form of micro-organization through which we can create a positive outcome—such as in the example I mentioned with Africa—simply by living. It's not about stopping what we're doing and then moving on to something different. It's simply about saying that even if we live today in a very luxurious and unbelievably fortunate situation, we have the opportunity to create economic sustainability. It's highly personal, because the foundation doesn't use our name or try to convince other people to take the same approach we're taking. Of course, I wouldn't be opposed to the latter, but when a collector buys a work of mine, the gallery doesn't tell him or her that a small portion of the money is going to a very good cause.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **So it's implicit philanthropy?**

Olafur Eliasson — You could say that. But there are moments when I quite explicitly reach out. Take, for example, the orphanage we're working with right now. Some of the teenage girls were raped, so suddenly there was an urgent need to install walls around the buildings. There are 250 girls on the compound, and there was no way to monitor the whole place and protect it from the outside. So I called up a very generous American couple—dear friends of mine—and told them about the problem. They donated 75,000 dollars to build this almost one-kilometer-long brick wall because the existing corrugated wall basically was falling apart.

So that's an example of where our foundation's small budget can't cope and how I reach out to others for assistance. What we can promise in return is that we personally make sure that the wall is built, and the donors then receive documentation of their contribution. It's a one-to-one organization—a micro-organization. We have a homepage; you can find all the information you need there [www.121Ethiopia.org].

I think one of the biggest problems with this kind of work in Africa is that people tend not to know how to help—besides maybe sending money to Oxfam, which is also fair enough. But the point is to find a way of living that actually makes a difference. Of course, this could quickly become slightly patronizing or moralizing, and I don't want it to be that way. It's just a way of living with something that's dear to you, and, obviously, having adopted two children from Africa you get another overlapping destiny, which is a vehicle for us to do this, as well.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **That's one production of reality. But what about the BMW project, which, I would say, is on a larger scale than the one for Louis Vuitton? There's this initial idea of BMW inviting artists to paint or decorate a car. It also involves a kind of engineering problem that requires pooling all kinds of knowledge and research. Could we talk a little bit about this project, and also about where it stands and how it's evolving?**

Olafur Eliasson — It's a fascinating project overall, and it's been interesting to engage with something as common as a car. One thing that's been challenging, but seems

to be working out, is the fact that BMW's motivation is promotion. And because I'm interested in raising critical questions and doing research that is not based on promotion, we've had few minor clashes in terms of the project's integrity. But I see this as a challenge, and I'm quite serious about my idea that art should take upon itself the responsibility of negotiating the way we produce reality together. I think it would be wrong to turn our backs on the corporate world and say, "I don't want to talk to you because you're only interested in promotion." After all, our lives are organized around marketing, capitalism, and the flow of goods. So the challenge for me has been to see whether I can succeed in these negotiations. In the context of working with BMW, I have been able to communicate a critical statement.

I should add that there are a lot of good things being initiated within big companies like BMW, such as research on sustainability. The quality of the research they're doing is high, as is the sophistication of the engines they're working on. So this means that, altogether, the complexity of the situation has been rather edifying. Also, they were able to agree to my idea—to tolerate my idea—of not wanting to become a promotional element within their company. This has made the project productive for both parties. The car is now being shown for the first time in San Francisco [Museum of Modern Art], and from there it will go on to Munich and then, I think, to Japan. I'm curious to see what comes of it.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **I think our readers might like to know how the car works.**

Olafur Eliasson — There are two main interests for me. First of all, the car has a hydrogen engine—it drives on liquid hydrogen. Its combustion produces only water. So the project is related to ecology, the oil industry, fossil fuels, and global warming. That's my first main interest. The other is the car as a moving device. The fact that we move is, of course, closely linked to temporality and the way we experience our surroundings. And it's related to city and landscape planning, to spatial theory, and to our bodies. We tend to forget that we spend a large proportion of our lives in vehicles like planes, cars, and trains that transport our body at much greater speeds than we would be able to achieve on our own. But what does it mean to experience our surroundings through a glass plate that is perhaps a little bit like a shop window in terms of isolating the senses? If you combine the environmental issues with the way we move our bodies, then the project becomes extremely interesting. Suddenly we're confronted with a whole range of questions related to subjectivity and collectivity: why would you drive a car when you can take the bus? What is so liberating about being alone in the car? One of the insights that has come out of working on this project is how a design object can actually support or sustain ideas about being "singular-plural"—in other words, about being part of a system and yet sustaining some degree of individuality. If we just make a little loop: essentially, looking at luxury goods through storefront windows is also closely related to questioning our desires, fantasies, and the

By temporality I mean being a part of society, simply being a part of the world. I think what even quite isolated places like Black Mountain College succeeded in was actually creating a relationship with the time in which they took place. Black Mountain College became part of utopian governing—of the thinking of time. We're currently in a situation where the idea of museums, detaching the object from its context and its time, has caught up with a lot of institutional thinking. So one could raise the question of whether institutions, as such, are coming to an end—at least as we know them. The question is whether exhibitions, like the ones you're doing on a daily basis at the Serpentine Gallery, will hold their own in society. We may need to change things much more radically to embrace the times we live in or address the needs of the future—in terms of what art can deliver, what art can do. This is why I think that integrating an educational system—like an art school or art academy—into the institution is important. Essentially, an art school is producing the future, and a museum or an institution is producing the past. This is why I wonder why the Serpentine doesn't open up an academy, inside and outside the Serpentine. And why don't museums, American museums for instance, embrace the fact that one can be both representational and presentational at the same time?

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **And what about books as vessels? I remember, at the very beginning, when we worked together in the nineties on various projects, you did these photocopied books for our exhibitions. You made fifty of them for Johannesburg, for your first Venice Biennale, and for other shows. And this has**

gained a wholly new dimension now with your extraordinary MoMA book, which is a real vessel, because it's a house as a book [*Your House*, 2006].

Olafur Eliasson — Bruno Latour says everything is part of the parliament of all things. I think a lot has already been said about the book as a vessel—things that are probably much more meaningful than anything I could say. In any case, the good thing about a book is, of course, that it focuses primarily on writing, and everybody expects this intentionality to be the carrier of meaning. The book I gave you, however, has a conflict in it, because the only way to read it is to flip the pages that don't contain any text. It's a spatial proposition, consisting of a model of my house in Copenhagen and made out of 452 individually laser-cut pages. I wanted to explore the fact that reading a book is a physical and a mental activity—it's like walking through a house, which in itself creates a little narrative. In Western history, there's a conflict between narrative and space, the narrative being representational and the modern conception of space being one of authenticity or immanence. And that's why I like the book, because it somehow isn't immanent but you create a little spatial narrative by leafing through it.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **Thank you, Olafur.**