Institut für Raumexperimente (Institute for Spatial Experiments), Berlin (2009-14)

Established in 1995, Olafur Eliasson's Berlin studio plays a central role in his multifarious work. Today, it hosts a team of some eighty-craftspeople, technicians, architects, archivists, administrators, and cooks. Eliasson has often thought of his process-driven work as being easily translated into an educational methodology. He has taught and lectured widely for
twenty years, and in 2006 initiated a series of events titled “Life Is Space”, whereby a rolling group of guests gave presentatlons in his studio.
In 2009 Eliasson received five years of funding from a state department to open an interdisciplinary school on the empty top floor of his studio. This experiment in arts education was called the Institut für Raumexperimente, or Institute for Spatial Experiments, and was affiliated with the Berlin University of the Arts as a kind of satellite department. Over the course of the institute's five years, a total of around seventy participants-who included artists; but also, architects, designers, musicians, scientists, and more-helped coproduce the school.
We spoke in the autumn of 2015, a year after the institute had come to an end. Eliasson reflected on its successes, and discussed how he sees quantifiable criteria and hierarchical models of knowledge production as antithetical to producing interesting artists, as well as his idea of setting up an online school.

What is an art education?

Sam Thorne:
What were your experiences of art school?

Olafur Eliasson:

I went to a typically hierarchical art academy, with a dean at the top, a handful of professors, and then a group of students. Essentially, the idea was that knowledge flowed downward. That was the predominant traffic of information that you, as a student, were a consumer of.

Where and when was this?

In Copenhagen, starting in 1989. But I faded out of art school-that is, I gradually left without ever formally leaving. I spent a year in America, from 1990 to 1991, then in '93 I moved to Germany. At the time, the main theoretical trajectory was based on French postmodern thinkers: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and some relatively exciting deconstructivist thinkers like Jacques Derrida. Their success was that they
verbalized the end of the modern era with great sophistication. This gave me some confidence in the power of language. I was also struck by their apocalyptic tone-the loss of navigation, the loss of reality. As a student, however, I absolutely couldn't identify with that. In fact, it prompted me to leave, because I knew that I would get depressed if I stayed any longer. I was very much an optimist, and I didn't have problems navigating within this increasingly fragmented world.

When you moved to New York, and then later to Germany, you worked as an artist's assistant. You've said that "there is a fundamental difference between being with an artist in a studio and being with a professor in an academy." Having faded out of education, as you put it, what did you see that difference as being back then?

In 1990 I worked as an assistant to an artist living in Brooklyn - Christian Eckhardt. He was based right at the bottom of the Williamsburg Bridge, where quite a few artists were at the time, and I was living very close to SoHo. That gave me access to quite a few artist-run galleries and alternative spaces. So it wasn't just about working for an artist, it was about experiencing all of the facets of what one can call the art world.

How did your early experiences shape your sense of what a studio could be?

As a child, my father had a studio, which was a magical and mysterious space, where the impossible became possible. Later, working as an artist's assistant, I grew familiar with the steps that lie in between thinking about a work of art that you'd like to do and the performative nature of a work of art once it is actually done. There's a whole sequence of steps: an idea, a sketch, a model, a test run. Gradually the idea gets a skeleton, then muscles, and then at some point the sculpture can walk. For me, driving around from a silk-screen studio to a painter's studio and on to a framer was a lovely way of experiencing this firsthand. The artist’s studio very much taught me how to manage the sequence of events without losing sight of the trajectory of the content. Later, that became very important with the school.
These experiences also taught me that it's a mistake to think that creativity lies in these different steps. Rather, creativity lies more in the consequences of doing these things than in the stuff itself. It's the reality-making aspect of this approach - turning thinking into doing - that makes it creative.

When did you first start thinking about what would eventually become the Institut für Raumexperimente? When did the idea of this school within, or rather on top of, your studio begin to take form?

I've always been interested in educational systems and have always lectured frequently. Also, the nature of my work is very easily translated into an educational methodology. The "Life Is Space" events that I have organized on occasion at my studio, beginning in 2006, address similar concerns to those that later motivated the institute. At "Life Is Space" I invite a range of guests-artists, musicians, architects, designers, curators, educators, philosophers, scientists-to make presentations on whatever they wish. The events follow no set plan, but unfold associatively, according to intuition.
Before starting the institute, I had often questioned whether the traditional approach to arts education, especially the American-style system, in fact promotes creativity at all. Or are its quantifiable criteria in fact aimed at a different kind of success-namely, a career-optimized and market-friendly type of art? I realized that the hierarchical model of knowledge production is not going to be very productive if we want to

produce artists for the next thirty, forty, or fifty years.
Living in Germany, there's a strong history of critical education. You're of course steeped in the tradition of the Bauhaus or the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm [Ulm School of Design]. The German tradition of academic knowledge production involves a great deal of participation from the students. It's a very bottom-up process.
Freedom of thought is, I think, something that Germans are obsessed with, whereas freedom of speech is something that Americans are very good at. In America, art students are much better at talking, and I mean no offense when I say that they don't talk so much about the freedom of thinking.
Over the years, I had been invited to take various teaching jobs in Europe. What struck me was that I was invited by art schools as well as by architecture, landscape-architecture, and urban-planning departments and universities. That motivated me to reach out for an educational model that would take in a broader field of space production and critique.
When the Berlin University of the Arts first approached me, I said I didn't want a traditional professorship. A couple of years later, though, they came back with a grant from the Senate Department of Education, Youth and Science of the State of Berlin, saying, "Now we have the money to do this interdisciplinary school you've been talking about." That's how I got five years of funding for the institute, so the program wasn't actually even funded out of the university's regular funds, but from third-party sources. This allowed me to more widely negotiate the conditions under which I wanted to do the school. The first thing was that, at the time, I had just acquired a new studio building, and it had an empty floor. I rented space for a symbolic amount to the University, who simply opened up a satellite department on top of my studio.

Was that proximity important to you?

By hosting the school in the same building as my studio, I intended to increase the sense of transparency regarding the practical sides of art production and artistic experimentation. At the time, I had around fifty people working in my studio full time and I thought it would be interesting for the participants of the school to have free access to this atmosphere. While the participants were not employees or part of the studio, at many times they were allowed to intersect with and engage in dialogue with every part of the studio.
The kitchen, for instance, was a shared area, where the participants of the school and studio would meet on a frequent basis, sharing lunch, four days a week.
I hired two codirectors right at the beginning, and I was very lucky to work closely with them for the duration of the school's existence – Christina Werner, who has a background in cultural studies, and Eric Ellingsen, a trained architect who is also an active poet. We said to the participants: "You are out in the real world and so is the school. The school *is* the real world." The idea was really to suggest that part of the school was on the street. It was not so much about moving participants into my studio as about moving them out of the academy. As you can see from the archive of the school, which is available online, there was a huge amount of art making and risk- taking in what we consider public space. For example, we had a picnic on the central traffic island of a busy round-about, between lanes of traffic, and we experimented with literally hundreds of sensory activities - like walking barefoot in the snow - things that you can only do in the street.

The school I wanted to make was not a school that was pre-defined. The idea was that the participants – as we called our students – would essentially be making whatever they make, whether it was art or something else, while at the same time coproducing the school. We started out with literally nothing in the space. So, the making of the school was one of the projects within the curriculum, which was itself also in the making.
We decided not to retreat to some safe haven of academic comfort. You're not "rehearsing" being an artist while you're in school to then be a "real" artist afterward. The idea was that you are a real artist at all times; you're not liberated by the comfort of not having to take full responsibility for what you do. On the other side, we also encourage the play and playfulness and risk-taking that one dares to engage in at school but are maybe afraid of later. We wanted to encourage this as an approach to life.

I understand that the kitchen has a very important place within your studio: What kind of role did it play within the school?

The kitchen works with an affordable though robust food concept, so the students could eat for free - and judging by the way they ate lunch, most of them were clearly not eating breakfast and dinner. [Laughs] More importantly, it offered a number of informal opportunities to share thoughts.
It became a meeting point for many events at the Institut für Raumexperimente; shared meals, food, and food experiments became intrinsic parts of the school's public events, based on ideas about hospitality and curating social gatherings, ideas that served the purpose of creating the conditions for learning together.
We did a "Curatorial Approach Marathon," for instance, where we ate with our hands, focusing on the performative and social aspects of eating, and an "Artist Marathon," where all the dishes served for lunch on each day were a single color - one day white, another day green, another orange, and one day pink. So the participants gradually became more attuned to the social construct we call "food." We also did a sticky-rice workshop where the great thinker Sarat Maharaj - who is a vegan - spoke about the vegan archive and about butchers and the slaughter of thoughts! And we organized concerts for taste, where you'd eat a certain sequence of things - popcorn, cornflakes, crunchy vegetables - while your ears were plugged, so that, in a sense, the concert took place in your skull.
Another initiative was "Grey Sheep" - a small project space next door to my studio, which instigates a dialogue among artists associated with the studio, the Institut für Raumexperimente, and a local audience. Over the years, we have hosted a series of exhibitions inside the space and in the courtyard outside, bringing together guests, ideas, and experiments. For instance, a mobile kitchen was built by an artist to serve food at one of the outdoor events, and at other events there were vegetables from the kitchen's rooftop garden and fermentation experiments prepared by the institute's participants and our kitchen team.

Why did you choose to call your school an institute? And why "for spatial experiments"?

I wanted it to be a kind of forum or parliament, as well as an educational environment. Raumexperimente - spatial experiments - came from the idea that we wanted something hospitable to anyone from the creative sector, something that

people working in music, theater, film, literature could feel comfortable with, as much as, say, a social scientist would.
It was very important to me that it was a public school.
The program and structure of the school were more complex than a class and more intimate and informal than a university department, yet we wanted it to be open to a wider public. The term "institute" then was accurate, since we were affiliated with the hosting institution, the Berlin University of the Arts. We were using public money, so we talked a lot about what kind of responsibility comes with that: Is it an active or a passive responsibility? We were almost like ambassadors of the public sphere, which is why we had an open-door policy. If strangers came in during a lecture, we would welcome them, but also ask them to introduce themselves. Taking away the burden/comfort of anonymity meant we could focus on how inclusion is actually hard work.

I understand that you had about twenty- five participants per semester - "spatially motivated people," as you have described them. How did you select these practitioners, and who were they?

The group grew organically, as most of the art students stayed with us for the whole ten semesters. In the end around seventy participants passed through our limbic system. A little over half of the participants came from the Berlin University of the Arts, joining us either directly after finishing their first two foundation semesters, or else they transferred into the insti-tute from another professor's class. The other participants applied from all over the world and registered as students at the Berlin University of the Arts. While a little more than half had a background in fine arts, quite a few had experience in other fields-for example, in psychology, mathematics, medicine, environmentalism, or landscape design.
We also had a grant system with two grantees per year. One of these was typically an artist who would take on an advisory role, as Ivana Franke and Elín Hansdóttir did. The other grant was offered to people from other backgrounds, such as a politician, a lawyer, a choreographer, or a musician. It was a challenge to integrate someone who had had literally no exposure to art, but it was part of this idea of not becoming some "art world only" elitist, closed environment. We put a lot of effort into creating an environment that took being outside of the academy very seriously. We engaged in a lot of collective experimentation with group dynamics, active inclusion, an open-door policy, and so on. We also had a lot of programs that were simply there to strengthen the evolution of the making of the school. We would often say, "Well, we are not a school yet ... " with the idea that on the last day of the school, when we closed it, we could say, "Now we have a school, and we are closing it." Which is maybe a little didactic; but it's a lovely conundrum.

Aside from your codirectors, there were something like four hundred core contributors to the school over the course of its five years.

We had the ambition to run a very intense program. When I was in art school, there was very little going on. So when I started the school I said, "We may as well do as much teaching as we can." It's great to be in Berlin, in that sense, because there's such a flow of interesting people passing through the city. A lot of the speakers addressed things that you might find at the periphery of the art world. For example, we looked at contemplative sciences connected to Buddhism and influenced by social neuroscience. We looked at poetry, how the shape and structure of language

and music come together. We looked at architectural practices, production, and criticism there were different lectures on such topics, but scattered over the five years.
So there were lots of things that I don't think a participant needs to be specialized in, but I do feel it was a productive topic through which the participants could critique themselves. The most interesting question to ask is: What is an actual art education?

How did your actual answer to that question shift over the five years of doing the school?

From the beginning, I knew that I didn't want it to be goal oriented. We always wanted to suggest that the process itself must be the primary source of reality production. We deliberately did not confuse career management with knowledge production. Today, everywhere in the world, there's a lot of pressure on young students to be very conscious of their careers.
Working in a process, I believe, means responding to an emotional need of a student. "Emotional" because very often the need is not verbalized at all; the participant might not even be conscious of it. I think one should really nurture exactly that moment when the student is in the process of expressing something that has one foot in a conscious place and one foot in a subconscious place. The hospitable nature and critical trajectory of the school reflected the participants' not-yet-conscious emotional needs, and through that, it remained open to their creativity.
This approach leads to a number of questions, such as: As an artist, do I feel included or excluded in our society? Does this fuel me or disconnect me? In groups, we asked, "How do we feel?" Sometimes we did nonverbal exercises to address our emotional desires. Do I feel confident about being creative? Or is creativity marginalized in our society? It was within that energy that we found our educational methodology. The idea was to make the participants comfortable with the idea that they were in fact teaching the school. The participants became the teachers because their role was to exercise their own agenda – to connect thinking and doing.

Over the course of a semester or academic year, or indeed the whole five years, how was this process structured?

Even though my two codirectors and I, of course, steered the trajectories quite a bit, we cultivated a strong sense of coproduction; it was very often organized based on what we thought the participants would want. This meant that when we brought in a social scientist who works with alternative housing systems, for instance, or a psychologist who works with trauma, it was not in order for the participants to learn more about the spaces that they could potentially put a work on art in. It was for them to identify with these other ways of looking at spaces to the extent that they could feel comfortable making something creative in them.
Rather than having an artist with a sculpture under her arm talking to an urban planner about a place where she could install her work, we really wanted to make the artist into an urban planner, if only for an hour or two. Why should a work of art not be an urban plan? It is not about how we do things, but about why we do them. We wanted to leave behind the dominant role of the artist and how he or she should operate in society.

Art schools are very rarely adequately documented. You dedicated the sixth volume of your Take Your Time publications to the institude, and titled it How to Make the Best Art School in the World. How did you approach documentation?

On the one hand, we wanted to build an archive that documents the protagonists, lectures, and teaching formats. But we also did a whole project on the future of archives – the archive as a proactive, rather than retroactive, reality producer. So the archive was never considered as only a representation of the school; it was also a tool. The documentation of what we were doing was – on a good day – itself an artistic form. The book was really more of a present to the participants after they'd left the school, a little celebration of all the impossibilities and unpredictable elements that built the school's trajectory. It's a visual essay that is driven by everything involved in making art. We did so much that isn't actually documentable in full.

Given the school's proximity to your own studio practice, were you ever anxious about simply replicating the traditional master-student system?

I was worried at the beginning, but the people who applied to my school were not interested in copying me. The people I accepted, at least, had a very strong sense of their own trajectories. Generally speaking, as is often the case in a student-professor relationship, they were more busy criticizing what I did than applauding it. [Laughs] It was lovely for me, because that gave me an opportunity to learn as well. I would often say that I am in fact the one being taught.

How did your studio change over the duration of the school?

I've always believed that the artist's studio should become a part of the map on which art institutions operate. The studio is by far one of the most interesting institutions in the art world. I always think that museums should be more like artists' studios, and that studios should be more transparent and open. People underestimate the fact that the artist's studio is a voice in our society. I've always been very outspoken about the values that the studio represents - successful or not, we have always been very interested in working across disciplines, getting involved with policy design or climate debates or with the private sector, which for many people is very controversial.

The school really just became an incredibly dynamic part of the studio building. It was not an extension of my studio, because the school was not the studio. The school was itself, but it certainly introduced a flux of young artists and thinkers through the studio. And the school participants also benefited from the pragmatism of the studio, as well as from the confidence that a studio like this can somehow produce.

At the moment, I'm noodling around with the idea of doing an art school online. To some extent, our archive was created because online access to creative knowledge produc-tion is becoming increasingly important. The archive was built as an act of hospitality to a potential online audience for students everywhere, as a kind of testing ground for making a teaching platform for art. The need for something like this became clear to me through my experience teaching as an adjunct professor at Alle School of Art and Design, Addis Ababa University. As part of the travels that we undertook together at the institute, we relocated the entire school to Addis Ababa for half a semester.

You set a list of suggested reading for participants, including Michel de Certeau, Thomas More, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Lawrence Weschler, and Bruno Latour. Who have been the writers who have been particularly useful for your thinking about education or art schools?

In general, our approach to forming a reading list was to encourage the interests and questions coming from the participants. This was mirrored in the "reading practice" that Christina and Eric initiated in the first semester. We asked the participants to suggest a text each week, and then these texts were complemented with texts chosen by us. Readings of the texts were done out loud by all the participants at the roundtable, and it also sparked more interesting poetry.
One of the books we read and returned to periodically was Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (1884), by Edwin A. Abbott. For our thinking on teaching and education, though, while we were influenced by some books, such as Jacques Ranciere's The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991), we actually pre-ferred to research historical models of arts education.

And which historical models were you researching?

We looked into experimental schools and initiatives such as; the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT, founded by Gyorgy Kepes and based on his engagement with the New Bauhaus School in Chicago; the work of Joseph Albers and his teaching at Black Mountain College; O. M. Ungers's 1960s classes at the Technical University in Berlin; the Institut des hautes études en arts plastiques in Paris, founded by Pontus Hulten with Daniel Buren, Serge Fauchereau, and Sarkis; and in the work of others for whom life, creativity, individual engagement, and study could not simply be separated. Their radical notions of learning in contemporary society inspired us.