

VIII — The vessel interview, part II NetJets flight from Dubrovnik to Berlin, 2007

Hans Ulrich Obrist — We're back on the plane, and this reminds me very much of a previous interview we did on our way back from Eidar. That's when you looked at the landscape and made the comment that the way back is always different—a repetition of difference.

Olafur Eliasson — When we flew back in Iceland, we talked about flying over the route we had previously traveled in the other direction by car. We flew pretty much exactly over that route. It's interesting because when you travel through a landscape, you measure a distance by referring to it as time. In other words, you say, "That mountain is one hour away." Or if you're hiking, you might say, "This is a four-day hike," which already gives you a sense of the distance because the body can normally only do so and so much in four days. And then, when you start hiking, you begin to use smaller temporal elements, even if you've got a map: "That plateau is four hours away, and the valley is probably twenty minutes from here because it's downhill, and then the green area behind it down to the lake is another two hours." Yesterday on Lopud Island in Croatia we talked a lot about space-time relationships, institutional practices, and making a difference. But this difference—nobody actually spoke about what it is. We all vaguely suggested that it's related to the inclusion of temporality. So flying with you now, thinking about Iceland and this idea of distances in landscape being temporal, comes to mind.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — It's repetition and difference not only in terms of our journey, but also in terms of the pavilion, because on Lopud Island we just saw the Venice Pavilion—the collaboration between you and David Adjaye [*Your black horizon*, Art Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2005]—but in a very different light.

Olafur Eliasson — That's true, and now the pavilion has a history. You could tell from the patina of the wood that it's grown old. In Lopud, it was already a familiar structure in the way the light came through the front side; it was all about memory and re-experiencing it, whereas in Venice, it was more about the expectations of what it would become. This time it had a different kind of gravity—the gravity of memory. It seemed somehow deeper and more solid on the ground—perhaps also because it's going to be there for a few years, whereas at the Biennale we knew it was transitional. In Croatia it has a lot of different qualities. There's a community and cultural history that's less related to art tourism. Venice has become a museum. In Croatia, the pavilion seems to suggest a contemporary relationship between the island and the community—the time we live in rather than an agglomeration of museological ideas. The pavilion, I think, makes the island much more contemporary.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — One of the interesting things about this journey was that it was also a journey into the past. On the panel this morning you talked a great deal about your beginnings, and I was intrigued by your remarks about *Gestaltpsychologie* and the importance it played for you in art school. When was this exactly?

Olafur Eliasson — In the late eighties, early nineties. Phenomenology became extremely important again in the early nineties as it reintroduced, in a sophisticated and complex way, a relative understanding of object versus subject—that is, of objects in the context of time and space and what those relationships mean and perform. When I started art school, one thing that seemed interesting to me about *Gestaltpsychologie* was that it worked with a specific idea of

the subject—the subject as a very productive entity. This was unlike phenomenology, which had a much more formal or objective idea of the subject. I think *Gestaltpsychologie* works specifically because it also has more to do with cognitive science and neurology. This is what triggered my interest—the idea that you could reinterpret the meaning of the individual based on the experience of the artwork.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — And who, in those early days, were your teachers? Who were your heroes?

Olafur Eliasson — When I read about *Gestaltpsychologie*, I focused on the general, basic experiments—about how expectations could influence the way you see very elementary ideas. Now I would probably say Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl, and a little bit later Gilles Deleuze. But when I work in my studio, things are a bit less philosophical and more hands-on, and this idea of something more pragmatic or utilitarian is more closely related to *Gestaltpsychologie* than it is to phenomenology.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — We've never really spoken about art school and who your teachers were.

Olafur Eliasson — I forgot to say who my heroes were. I went twice to America to work, in 1990 and 1991, and this was when the art market crashed and everything changed completely. It was a very odd situation for me, arriving the day after the crash. It was almost entropy. I was working for an artist called Christian Eckhart. He made monochromes and was one of those neo-geo-artists, with a slightly more spiritual element to his work—icons and so forth. He gave me the book about Robert Irwin, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*,¹ which was very inspiring. Then I started looking from Robert Irwin to James Turrell to Gordon Matta-Clark, Larry Bell, and Maria Nordman. So these were my heroes, but I think they lacked a kind of frictional relationship with the world. In an odd way, they seemed to live on their own planet. For me, I think Robert Irwin was the best of the group. He's remained so true to his principles. But I've also become more interested in Michael Asher. There was an amazing show of his in Switzerland.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Do you mean the show in the Kunsthalle in Bern where he liberated the heating radiators [*Michael Asher*, Kunsthalle Bern, 1992]?

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, that one. It was a very important show for me. Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Smithson—basically where things became more about reality again.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — And what was it about Robert Irwin that interested you?

Olafur Eliasson — I liked the fact that, in contrast to many of the others, he wasn't into mysticism. His work is about pragmatic ideas about the body, space, and experiential issues. He's a very generous and spiritual person, but his work isn't about illusions—it's about reality.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — I'm also curious when you began to feel that you were part of an artistic generation—or at least when you began to feel that there were other people around, who had similar time-related interests.

Olafur Eliasson — The first time I realized I was part of a generation was when I discovered that the similarity was not in form but content. The nineties were really the time when form was liberated—everything was post-form and post-matter. And content could to some extent prescribe the form, because the relationship between form and content changed. Form became

¹ Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley, etc.: Univ. of California Press, 1982).

polyphonic and performative; it became nonprescriptive, leaving much to the engagement of the individual. This is why I also said that phenomenology in the early nineties fell short of being productive, because it essentially maintained the already existing idea of what a body and a subject could do in terms of relationships with the surroundings. But as soon as content was considered a performative element of the work, I started to realize that I had a generation of people around me. Just think of the work of Carsten Höller, Philippe [Parreno], and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — And Rirkrit Tiravanija?

Olafur Eliasson — Rirkrit is so special, but it's also about friendships and the artists from the gallery in Berlin of which I was part—Michel Majerus and the painter Franz Ackermann, Tobias Rehberger, even Sharon Lockhart and some of the other L.A. artists.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Felix Gonzalez-Torres once told me that Andrea Rosen's gallery felt like home, and I've always had the feeling, in terms of your gallery, that there was a very close relationship. And then there's your shared studio space with Tacita [Dean] and Thomas [Demand].

Olafur Eliasson — It's important to understand that a good gallery can help an artist make better art. It's as simple as that. And this has nothing to do with the market—with the commodification of objects or with what a gallery fundamentally is, which is a dealer of art. Because a very good dealer doesn't just provide the artist with resistance or friction, but gives him a frame of reference that can be productive. I think the gallery in Berlin—neugerriemschneider—was extremely productive in this way.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — And what about the shared studio space with Tacita and Thomas?

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, we all spend a lot of time in the studio—not necessarily all of it working. So in that sense there's a bit of a community. And, of course, there are all the other people working there, as well, which creates a kind of “glue” that turns the whole thing into a small community. There's also the fact that my space is located between Thomas and Tacita—and that I have a large kitchen with a coffee machine. You know how things work when you're the one with the coffee machine—it's where people tend to hang out!

Hans Ulrich Obrist — How is your working relationship with Thomas? Is it osmotic?

Olafur Eliasson — Thomas, as you can imagine, is very organized and clear about where or how he draws his line. I'm actually more the type who occupies things. So I'm not sure I would describe our working relationship as osmotic. In fact, we have different working methods and, formally, he is very far away from me. The closest we ever got to a collaboration was when Thomas bought a very sophisticated paper-cutting machine, and I instantly sent one of my people off to learn how to use it so we could profit from Thomas' investment [*laughs*].

Hans Ulrich Obrist — You have a lot of people working for you. That's maybe another aspect we should talk about. When we first met, you had one assistant, but now your studio is as big as a mid-sized architecture office, with almost fifty people.

Olafur Eliasson — Well, at the moment, there are about thirty-five of us.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Which is the size of Fumihiko Maki's office. Maki told me once, as have several other architects, that he never wanted to grow far beyond thirty or forty. If an office is too big, it doesn't always produce intelligence, but eliminates it—and creativity. On the other hand, Jacques Herzog, Zaha Hadid or Rem Koolhaas have hundreds of employees, and it still seems to work very well. So there are very different rules, very different ways of inventing an office. But in the art world, there are only a handful of artists with so many

assistants: So I'm very curious how you deal with the complexity of a growing office and how you ensure that it produces intelligence and doesn't become something you have to escape.

Olafur Eliasson — A couple of years ago it really expanded and I went from fifteen people to twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five. At some point, I even had fifty, but now we're back down to around thirty-five people. In any case, it's important to keep in mind that there's a fundamental difference between the infrastructure of an architectural office and that of my studio, where people's job descriptions vary considerably. For instance, I have two electricians, two blacksmiths, a carpenter, a furniture builder, as well as geometricians and artists. I also have two people who are educated in stage design and theater. Then, of course, I have a group of architects, but even within that group there are large differences: some of them are from the world of graphic design, some do very sophisticated 3D-drawings, and some are more hands-on. I have an electrical engineer, and I have a light planner. Occasionally, I have one or two model makers, just as architectural offices do. Finally, the office itself is divided into rather diverse areas: I have a publication department and an archive with two or three art historians. And then there's the bookkeeper and a project manager. But despite the number of people, it's still very clear, very hands-on, and it's also hierarchical to some extent. There's no point in suggesting that it's a kind of a community where everybody is deciding everything together. It's clearly organized around a system. This is not to say that I'm always making the decisions, because I'm not. I do make crucial decisions about what I feel is artistically important, but there are still hundreds of decisions about bookkeeping, for instance, that I'm not aware of. Sometimes it eats up my time to talk to everyone, but I don't have the feeling that it's difficult to run. And, at the end of the day, when I look back at what we've achieved, I usually feel that we've been very productive.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — It's also a laboratory of new ideas—a place, for example, where conferences take place.

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, it has increasingly taken on a life of its own. Of course, it's still guided by the projects we do, and essentially it reflects its surroundings—it's not an autonomous body living encapsulated far away from its surroundings. It's part of the city in which it is; it's part of Berlin. There aren't many areas located today where experiments are actually taking place, as Molly Nesbit has pointed out. There's great potential in the fact that this laboratory has a life that's partially communicated to the outside, via the experiments that are brought out, to some extent, in the exhibitions. However, the exhibitions essentially show the nature of the experiment rather than the experiment itself. So there's something in the laboratory that's rather unique, and this is why it's almost like a body with its own life—with its own ideas and mind and production and economy. I've increasingly started doing things such as small symposia and workshops in the studio. I think the next step will be a school—an art school, if you want to call it that. It will be a school for spatial experiments in close affiliation with the studio. However, it's not about education, but about creating language to communicate. I think people are going to receive an education regardless of whether I found a school or not, but they're going to speak different languages, and what I'd like is to create a stronger affiliation to language. Then, hopefully, what one says in the language will also make sense.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — We spoke about many different types of vessels earlier today—the gallery as a vessel, neugerriemschneider as a vessel, your studio with Tacita and Thomas as a vessel. But what about the idea of the museum as a vessel? You recently installed an incredible piece at the Lenbachhaus, which addressed light conditions within museums. Marcel Broodthaers said the museum is one reality that's surrounded by many other realities that are worth being explored. Although we've already discussed your major museum shows with ARC [Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris] and the Tate, we haven't talked about your recent explorations of museums' more structural aspects. In Munich, it's an almost invisible intervention, at least at first glance. It really has more to do with ...

Olafur Eliasson — Temporality.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Temporality! Maybe we could talk about Munich first, and then about museums in general.

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, in the space at the Lenbachhaus in Munich there's normally daylight coming through the ceiling. We closed it off, and then I put in a light system that can be adjusted to emit different qualities of white light. It's playing with the fact that there's a Kandinsky show with some of the paintings that Kandinsky produced on a journey from St. Petersburg to Tunis, if I'm not mistaken; I think he went via Stockholm, Germany, Italy, Sicily, and then on to Tunis. So we tried to record the light from the places where he executed the paintings, and then we took that and put it in the gallery where the paintings are hanging. It's not necessarily about the right way to illuminate the paintings—it's about the fact that white light is also constructed and not, as we might think, to be taken for granted. It's about the fact that our relationship to light is a cultural and geographical matter and not a natural one. So in this sense, the intervention in the museum is also about showing that art is not necessarily always or only on the wall, but also placed within an institutional frame that offers conditions for the experience of looking at the paintings. As Daniel Birnbaum has remarked, we've come to an end with the biennales—with the mega-shows like the *documenta*. The format has collapsed. There isn't enough content being produced out of these, and we're all so saturated in the formal set-up of these places that we don't read the content anymore. We go through them in a very unproductive manner and are now in a situation where we need to find new ways of doing things. And it's not necessarily the form, but rather the nature of our relationship to the form of the show that's not working. A museum is perfectly capable of reinventing itself without changing its architecture—which brings us back to what I said about what constitutes the generation I'm part of. It's not the form or the walls, but the ways we share an interest in re-inventing reality. This is what the museum in Munich has adapted to.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — The Lenbachhaus?

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, the Lenbachhaus has adapted to this, embarking on a path that questions whether it's possible to challenge this very dominant modern idea of the truth—whether it's possible to challenge authorship and authenticity, and to do it in the context of modern masterpieces by Kandinsky, which I think is very daring considering the conservative nature of most museums today.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — This leads us back to the question of the light we see in museums. It's closely related to the white cube. It's really by convention that, at a certain moment, the decision was made that the color white should be used. In the panel discussion, you said it could easily have been a different color—yellow, for example. It's the same thing with our interview today—we could just as easily have done the interview in German or French. It's just that the decision was made at a certain moment to proceed in English. White is the color of museums, and obviously the whole history of modern architecture is related to this color. Let's talk about museums and color.

Olafur Eliasson — White, of course, is not just a color, but a concept—a matter of upbringing and culture. There's the idea, for instance, that white has a disinfecting effect on the body. The idea of early modern architects was to suddenly purify space by rationalizing the color away, turning white into this unbelievably dominant idea of liberation. And somehow we now take it for granted that this is the natural environment for viewing art. This is not all about changing our desire or changing the color white, but rather realizing that things are often more culturally constructed than we think.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — My last question, Olafur, is one I've asked you many times before: what is your favorite unrealized project?

Olafur Eliasson — I would like to build a museum—to reevaluate the nature of a museum and build it from scratch, not renovate an old one. It should be both an art school and a museum, and in between the two there should perhaps be a little hotel—a place where people come and spend time.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — A relay?

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, and maybe the rooms themselves will be the artworks. Maybe the way people end up spending time in the hotel rooms will be what the students do and the museum shows. Maybe the life in this building is what, from a museological point of view, will be the performative element. And the building itself is just the form—it's a content machine.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Ah, yes—another vessel! This is our vessel interview, and that should be part of the title.

Olafur Eliasson — A vessel interview—it's its own vehicle.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Thank you so much.