Olafur Eliasson: Verklighetsmaskiner/Reality machines

Olafur Eliasson and Daniel Birnbaum in conversation

Daniel Birnbaum: I would like to start with the fact that we are planning to present this exhibition in the middle of a capital, but it's a very special situation: we're almost cut off from the rest of the city – you have to cross a bridge to reach the museum because it is located on the first island of the archipelago. It's really no longer quite in Stockholm. The whole city consists of islands, and the island of Skeppsholmen is already a little bit of a world in itself. Do you think it's important that it is happening in this island world?

Olafur Eliasson: Moderna Museet is almost a biotope within the city. I have the feeling, though, that when you go there, you don't step out of the city and into another sphere, another universe. In fact, going to the museum requires you to step closer to reality. It's like looking at reality, looking at Stockholm or Sweden or the world, through a microscope. Skeppsholmen is part of the map of Stockholm – the city extends to the islands. The Old town is a little island; then there is Helgeandsholmen with the parliament, Riksdagen; and if you stand on Kungsholmen and look over towards the parliament building – that is where we dyed the water for *Green river* back in 2000. It's clear that even though these institutions and parts of town are located on islands, they are still very connected.

DB: One aspect of *Green river* – which you and I worked on together in Stockholm – was that it really made the city very visible in a way: we did it without announcing it, and it created huge confusion. Normal buses, cars, and taxis stopped on the bridge, and some people filmed it and wondered what it was. Even the main daily paper, *Dagens Nyheter*, ran a story the following day calming people down, saying that the police had announced it was a standard operation, and so on. For weeks after that nothing happened, and then there was a little note in the same paper saying that it was actually an artwork. I think one of its strongest aspects was that something strange and surprising happened at a place where you were not expecting anything like this; it made people look at the city in a new way.

OE: Absolutely. There's a tendency to focus on the representational qualities of space: people find comfort in viewing space as static, which might also be for pragmatic reasons, since then you don't

have to negotiate it. You rely on a default feeling of safety. By disrupting the picture-postcard view of downtown Stockholm, *Green river* added a dimension of unpredictability to the city, and I think a great city can greet such unforeseen events with hospitality. To me, the strength of a city, its resourcefulness, depends on whether it is able to embrace, or at least withstand, rupture.

Green river was also an attempt to make passers-by in Stockholm reconsider what it means to have trust in public space and how it is organized. Is public space modelled on a top-down plan or does it actually grow from bottom-up activity, where sustainable relations between the private and public sectors are generated, where inclusion is the guiding tool to understanding what space is?

DB: It might be, though, that you will step past that bridge, not into an unpredictable space of experimentation, but into a classic, static museum situation ... Moderna Museet has the reputation of being an experimental space, and we're trying hard to maintain that legacy, but at the same time the museum can also be seen as a big, stable, institutional machine with an important collection of works by Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Cindy Sherman, etc., and the question would be how you could somehow show that the exhibition, happening in several spaces, is porous and open to things outside, because otherwise we are not working with a biotope; it's a fortress of a museum.

OE: That's actually a question immanent to all institutions with canonical collections, not only Moderna Museet. I think there's great potential in developing the museum's relationship with society. The institution can introduce a kind of civic agency that is not located in the museum itself; it is rather on the periphery of the museum, supported and powered by it. The question is how best to amplify that approach. How can we develop the museum as a platform for continued experimentation and risk-taking in society, as a space for social research and development? A museum shouldn't offer experiences to be consumed; it's a place that asks you to work, to produce instead of consume – and it can ask you to work really hard! It requires you to see, feel, and think and all the while reflect on the process of seeing, feeling, and thinking. A good museum suggests ways of extending the experience that is evoked by the artworks and their context, and which is co-shaped by you, into the rest of your life and into society.

It's been a while since museums were seen as containers for artworks. When visitors walk through the museum, they should feel that they are, in fact, co-producing the space. This goes beyond the traditional arguments of phenomenology, in which people are seen as co-producers and which, I'd say, to some extent serve as the foundation for our discussion. But in my opinion, we need to reach further. I try to break down a too-rigid understanding of the space of the museum by, for instance, making my

shows present in people's minds even before they arrive at the museum; the show should hover on the periphery of their consciousness, on their horizon somewhere.

DB: We both share an interest in breaking down the idea of a closed architecture that decides everything for the viewer and for us. In Berlin, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in 2010, we did that through several strategies for your *Innen Stadt Aussen* exhibition: one was to open the exhibition step by step, so that it didn't have an actual opening date, but many opening dates, and the show was a little bit like an archipelago, as it took place at several locations. In this sense, both time and space were a bit dislocated. Then again, the space of Martin-Gropius-Bau itself was also a classic one. But we broke it down with the idea that the public sphere outside the museum should enter it, and the museum is part of the public sphere. We even made this clear by bringing paving stones into the museum [*Berliner Bürgersteig,* 2010], which kind of broke down the distinction between inside and outside. Maybe on an island, in Sweden, it's a different game, but it's perhaps of interest to think how we can make it porous, in the sense that there are openings in both directions; that there is ongoing communication between inside and outside, between architecture and nature – perhaps *ecology* is a word to think about a little bit.

OE: Yes, today, ecological systems are looked upon almost as models for society. I think we are beginning to work with a more porous notion of self, where the porousness lies in our ability to identify not just with other people, but also with the planet, with animals, objects, and structures that we don't normally identify with, and to find a reflection of our emotional needs in *the other*, understood in a very broad sense. In recent philosophical thought, there is this non-centralized model for looking at ourselves or at a city or the world – much in the vein of Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* for example – where the relationship between periphery and periphery is direct and not dependent upon a centre. I've been inspired by Bruno Latour, a very good friend, and his thoughts on James Lovelock and Gaia and the need to see everything, including animals and inanimate objects – not just human beings – as agents in the intricate networks that make up our world, biological and lived. I think it's very healthy to take this perspective. It sharpens the question of what it means to take responsibility, both locally and globally. Ecology, as well as what has recently come to be known as object-oriented ontology in philosophy, is about seeing yourself as part of a complicated ecosystem, made up of a network of agents that are not only, simply, human beings, and acknowledging that you are inseparable from it, even though you might feel alienated at times. Timothy Morton's thinking is a great example of this. The challenge is to transform this kind of thinking into institutional methodology; institutions

have a history of polarizing self and other, subject and object, and the idea of collecting is reduced to a regressive activity that is mostly about storage. Turning talk into productive activity requires us to take the deconstruction of our by now naturalized ways of seeing ourselves in and with the world to a much deeper level.

DB: It's interesting that you are now bringing in relatively recent theoretical conversations, but I feel you were already working with these themes long before they became topics for people like Timothy Morton. I remember in your first catalogue – or at least the first catalogue that I'm aware of – there was a fantastic text by Jonathan Crary ["Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events" in *Olafur Eliasson* Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1997]. There he already described machine-like situations that break down the dualisms of technology and nature, artificial and organic – it was all already there. So even back then you were saying that ecology is not only out there, that it's not nature versus humanity; it's always a more complex conversation. It's interesting that it was so clear in your earliest works, and now it's become one of the key discussions in philosophy and social theory, inspired by Latour.

OE: You're right. The ecological perspective, which has always interested me, has become more mainstream in the last five to ten years, especially because of climate change. Thinking not just about human beings, but about human beings in the environment, acknowledging our impact on ecosystems that go far beyond our individual lives, has become an activity for everyone. The question for me is really about how we can turn our thinking on this topic into doing, our knowledge into action.

DB: When I brought up ecology, I was also thinking about our surroundings, about the multiplicity of things that live on and around our island: birds and fish, trees, plants, and people. I'm wondering about that organic world, and if it can become visible also inside the museum.

OE: Many people polarize nature and culture, inside and out, but I think it's possible to be critical and to work within what we are criticizing at the same time. We don't have to depart from the old completely. There may be something very rewarding about exhibiting in a modern, white cube-type of museum – it presents a frictional and performative relationship with reality that is quite healthy. What even the most conventional museological approach suggests is that museums offer us the possibility of sharing an experience – something emotional, something physical – without excluding others who disagree with you. It might actually contribute to the success of the experience that the person next to you doesn't have the very same experience.

So I believe in both criticizing the system and working within it, and I actually see the two as an extension of each other. This isn't necessarily a paradox, because there is, in fact, no outside, as Latour also says. I think it's necessary to work with inclusion in a much more radical way. This is also interesting in relation to Sweden – perhaps one of the most robust countries in the world, with its powerful welfare model, and yet we see incredible polarization, with Swedes finding it increasingly difficult to be inclusive.
You spoke about the idea of hospitality; for me, it's not just about the space between the subject and the object, but rather about how the space of a museum suggests that people relate to each other and to art: it's two people disagreeing but still being together. It is 'a being singular plural', as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has said. I like this idea because it introduces questions of the *we*: which *we*s are we part of? Local, interest-driven, national, European, global *we*s? I'm curious what the Swedish *we* is. I have the feeling that the *we*s are getting smaller, although global connectivity is a word everyone uses these days.

DB: Say there is such thing as a Scandinavian model – I'm sure there is, and that Sweden was and probably is the most extreme example of a welfare state. It's a version of modernity that was pushed a very long way, and it also had a certain aesthetics that had a strong emphasis on the *wes*. It's a big question, but what is it in that model that attracts you most?

OE: It has to do with seeing the relationship between cause and effect. What seems to be one of the main successes of the Scandinavian model is that it has made people believe that their investment in and commitment to society matters. I think one of the greatest challenges today is indifference, the fundamental disconnect between thinking and doing that makes people who may believe strongly in something not transform this belief into action, because whether they act or not doesn't seem to have much effect – it's not tangible or measurable. But it is crucial to feel the impact, the consequences of one's actions, in lived life. The renewed interest in interdependence and collaboration, not least online, is compelling, however, and I'm very interested in the kind of micro-responsibility it generates. When we start taking things such as peace or democracy for granted and stop nurturing these states of co-existence, they become representations of their real selves, and we lose the connection to their felt reality, not unlike what we said about space in relation to *Green river*.

DB: One thing that might have to do with this – or at least something that gives our conversation a very concrete discussion framework – is that we are doing an exhibition that takes us from an art museum,

with a canonical collection, into a space that is about applied art. We are organizing the exhibition together with our neighbour ArkDes, an institution which also has a collection, but obviously of a different kind. It includes architectural drawings and plans and has a mission to initiate discussions on city planning, design, architecture and how we live together. The show will reflect on and question the traditional borders of art. Of course, your art consistently does that in many ways, and you often work with architecture and even design objects. In a sense, you have moved from traditional art objects over to things that are produced in a perhaps more democratic way. So, you've done these things before, but for us it's new.

OE: The language we use when looking at art and space and architecture as performative entities is maybe new, but the truth is that what art and space *do* is old. I think an old painting addresses similar questions.

Looking at a work of art that profoundly reflects a feeling that you have but are not yet entirely conscious of having creates what we might call *felt meaning*. In a way, this mirroring may be a relief to you, if you think: "Yes, this work succeeds in acknowledging or holding this feeling that I have but have never verbalized". The philosopher Claire Petitmengin characterises *felt meaning* as being at once fuzzy and very intense – it emerges at a deep, pre-reflective level and is inevitably *embodied*. Instead of being the outcome of just one of our senses at work, felt meanings are often multisensorial, bringing together shapes, density, vibrations, resonance, rhythm … I think it is a great way of describing what may arise when you look at a work of art. A great book, a concert, or a play can do the same thing. Especially today, where quantifiable successes are championed everywhere, the *process* of turning an idea, or even a feeling, into a structure, an action, or a sculpture or painting holds important answers as to how one can create civic engagement and social change. Now, this is also a very Swedish and Social Democratic value, of course, but I do think that the model is very robust when it comes to identification and care today: when engaging with culture you allow culture, a reflection of your emotional need, to engage you. This may end up being exploitative and negative, but it can also be very productive and critical, in the good sense of the word, and entail a process of identification that gives you a sense of worth.

DB: In many ways, your exhibitions emphasize that art is less about objects and commodities, and more about experiences and a sense of hospitality, a more general sense of sharing. Yet some of your exhibitions become spectacles, where the experience is not about owning an object, keeping in mind, of course, that experience itself can be a commodity. I'm sure that this is one of the most difficult things

to navigate – when is a shared experience an experience that liberates us from a certain sense of spectacular capitalist commodification, and when does it risk becoming a commodity-producing experience-machine?

OE: It's a very fine line. Experience used to be much less of a mainstream term than it is today. It was explored in philosophy, psychology, and the arts, of course. But with my generation, the market discovered that experiences are sellable. Suddenly everyone is selling experiences instead of goods. What these commercial experiences have in common is that they steer clear of any critical evaluation. Companies would never encourage you to reflect critically on the construction of your experience while you are having it – and this makes for a different type of experience from the one explored in art. The shift towards experiences has had a positive impact, too, though. It allows the broader public to embrace atmosphere and subjective engagement as valid indicators of success. The acknowledgment of the term *atmosphere,* for instance, means that urban planners have started using more sophisticated tools in designing new civic spaces. Another positive change is that people have gained more trust in their ability to engage with sensory experiences – which is probably, to some extent, a reason why more people are visiting museums than ever before. And I trust people to recognize that experiencing art involves a critical approach as a key component. I actually think that most people can clearly distinguish when something is art and when it is not. I'm equally confident of art's resilience, and even when it is integrated into such systems, I think it is much stronger than many believe. On the one hand, we should celebrate the critique, coming from theory, of the commodification of experience – this is our tool. On the other hand, I think it's important to engage in dialogue with, say, Louis Vuitton, as I've done, and suggest that there has to be a way that art can work with the private sector and still come across well. I also think it's wrong to see the public sector as a free sector, where the threat of instrumentalization doesn't exist.

DB: Since I come from a more theoretical, critical-thinking background myself, of course I'm aware that it sometimes produces a predictable and not very productive form of criticism, which can seem reactionary, where criticism seems impossible and it's just a gloomy discourse. I do think that it's more about finding zones of experimentation or pockets of play in the world that actually exists, and it is about the intermingling of such forces – there is no such thing as a completely free zone that is not oriented towards commodification, that is non-commercial and publicly funded … and maybe there has never been one in the strict sense.

OE: I think making art and being involved with creative work is an incredibly fierce process, through which you stay connected with the world. I might be generalizing a bit, but creative choices made in a commercial context are often only formal ones – choosing red instead of blue, for instance. For me, a creative choice has to do with considering the effects the choice has on the world the moment you make it. It's about asking why a certain problem or question arose, what caused it to arise, and what the consequences of solving it with a certain material or idea would be.

But a finished artwork is not entirely in the hands of the artist; it lies as much in how the artwork is displayed and communicated. So we shouldn't be blind to the fact that the potential of art, alongside its ephemeral qualities, is partly undermined from *within* the art world – by the market, the auction houses, the art fairs, and the general brutality and self-obsessive nature of the art world.
I remain convinced, however, that art, as well as the cultural sector as such, is incredibly robust. Art really has great potential when it comes to forging connections and creating social awareness and interaction. I think one of the great resources that art and the cultural sector share is that they speak to people in an inclusive way. They create shared environments, where differences of opinion are not only tolerated but accepted and encouraged.

I am very interested in how cultural strategies, how art and the communication of art, often present models for society, and I've grown increasingly fascinated by the potential that I see in artworks for non-arts contexts. I've spent quite some time with politicians recently, hosting heads of state and EU politicians at my studio, for example, and I've become involved in a project to revitalize the values of the UN, using culture to help create stronger emotional identification with the work of the UN. I think the languages of arts and culture can really achieve something here because they work so strongly with embodiment and felt experiences – and these are necessary to inspire positive action in response to the challenges, environmental and otherwise, that we, the citizens of the world, are confronted with today.