

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. 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 idea of the self and consumerism. We could say that the car is a container.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — I'd like to ask you to tell me a bit more about this recurring concept of the singular-plural. It seems like a key concept for you. Can you explain how it works?

Olafur Eliasson — My last book was called *Your Engagement Has Consequences*, and the titles of my works indirectly speak about what singular-plural means and how the idea of the singular can be nurtured and handled in a responsible way. I've stressed that communicative effort related to art shouldn't be normative. Unfortunately, institutional systems today have a tendency to be normative or to generalize the experience of art to some degree. But how do you actually take your own individual experience of something and do something productive with it? How do you create a conception of individuality that, in today's society, has an impact? This is where the idea of plural or collectivity or "being-with" comes into play. Suddenly, it actually matters whether you are part of a context. And this feeling that you're part of something is extremely valuable for productivity or the production of reality. So when I talk about being singular-plural, it's about the feeling of "being-with." I would suggest that the singular only really works as a concept if there is some understanding of collectivity. To emphasize the complexity of this, it's probably important to mention that in Scandinavia, where I grew up, the model of the welfare society and the idea of collectivity were stretched much farther than in the rest of Europe. It was a very successful model in many ways, considering that France, for instance, ended up having a very dogmatic version of it, and Germany is essentially—well, let's skip that whole thing with Germany.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Let's speak about Germany.

Olafur Eliasson — I just don't know. I'd like to say something about it, but somehow Germany has such a different story with the East-West developments. It's hard to draw comparisons. But what I meant is that, eventually, the notion of collectivity in Scandinavia became so dogmatic that it ended up being inflexible—somehow it seemed to suggest or create a kind of intolerance. And this is to some extent anchored in the welfare model; it simply generated rules for how people could be happy, and then they started living by those rules. But times—and, with them, values—changed, and suddenly we were living by rules that no longer applied to the times we were part of. People started becoming more intolerant. That's what we have in Scandinavia today. But, as I said, looking at the rest of Europe, Scandinavia might actually come across as a pretty sustainable society considering the different types of phobias we find elsewhere. At any rate, there seems to be an increasing desire to re-evaluate the meaning of the words "collectivity" and "individuality" nowadays. I'm not talking about the new kind of right-wing desire to create a society based on a lot of egoistic ideas where everybody is responsible only for themselves—which I think is happening in Great Britain, for instance. We need to emphasize the importance of public

coherency or the notion of the public or the state, as such, and within that to find a resourceful model for being individuals. The terms “individual” and “collective” are often considered polar opposites, and what I think art and good design and architecture can succeed in doing is to place the idea of the singular *within* the idea of being plural. Suddenly, the word “feeling” becomes very crucial here. Within the plural, you can still feel capable of handling your own life—that your life has consequences and that you’re an individual. This is where the term singular-plural comes from. I suppose we’re still waiting for thinkers like Bruno Latour and Jean-Luc Nancy to add further dimensions to the meaning of these words, to help them have a sound impact on society. I think it’s a question of a larger movement altogether.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — I’d like to return now to the idea of the vessel: the Louis Vuitton project as a type of vessel, the car as another vessel, and the pavilion as yet another. Rem Koolhaas, who, together with Cecil Balmond, did the Serpentine Pavilion last year [2006], said that a pavilion without content is a meaningless shape. So a vessel is always also a carrier of content. This brings us to your pavilion for the Serpentine [2007], which you co-designed with Kjetil Thorsen, invited by Julia Peyton-Jones and me [the Serpentine Pavilion project was initiated by Julia Peyton-Jones in 2000]. It will be one of your first larger architectural structures. Before we talk about the relationship between art and architecture in general, perhaps it would be a good idea to discuss the pavilion and the way this spiral-like space evolved.

Olafur Eliasson — As you said, a form without content is meaningless; and, I would argue, a form without time is not even a form. Or you could say that content is also time, because content can never be a picture; content is only content when it’s real, and reality is only real when there’s temporality. So we’ve tried to amplify the idea of content by giving the pavilion a shape that stretches temporality. “Stretching” here means that it almost translates your presence into a temporal matter. But I can answer your question more specifically: we have focused on a ramp and the movement around the center of the pavilion. It’s almost like a centrifugal force. The dynamics involved in the pavilion’s shape are closely related to how you experience it as you move through it. This, of course, suggests that the best way of seeing this pavilion is to involve yourself with it. And this is where the content is produced. Content is not just programmatic—it’s also when people go from a state of indifference to a state of difference, it’s creating difference. And if the shape of the pavilion can transport people from indifference to difference, whether they like it or not, we have already created something. This is why the sails, the floor, and the roof are a kind of animation. Every aspect of the design has been laid out to suggest that if you move, the pavilion will immediately look slightly different. And, of course, it’s based on the quite simple idea that if you lift people off the ground, you challenge both their horizontal and vertical orientation.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — I’d like to ask you to tell us more about what you’ll be doing at the Manchester International Festival [June 28 –July 15, 2007], because you haven’t spoken about that project yet and it’s related to this discussion of temporality. The notion of temporality is clearly at the center of *Il Tempo Del Postino* in Manchester, where Philippe [Parreno] and I are trying to curate an exhibition in which art is not about occupying space, but occupying time. To some extent, it’s a question of time in relation to a group. I’d also be curious to know your thoughts about *Il Tempo Del Postino*.

Olafur Eliasson — I feel the idea of a narrative has suddenly become more apparent again. And the opera, obviously being about a narrative, seems to have a challenging dimension to it as an occupation of time. But if you take the narrative out of the opera, you’re left with a durational sequence that you can fill up with projects or works of art. It’s not unlike when you walk through a gallery and see an exhibition with many spaces, except that here they’re walking through you, so to speak. You’re sitting still and the space is performed in front of you—the museum is being built up before your very eyes and then taken down one space after the other, each with its own narrative and all linked to each other by a meta-narrative. It’s interesting because the opera world seems to have reached its limits, being, as it is, so set within its own frame of reference. It has mutated into a conservative field that only in few

instances reaches out into reality. At the moment, temporality might be the most constructive dimension if you want to create a narrative. So my idea is to challenge the very basic questions of what a space does—that is, the audience in relation to the stage, and vice versa. What does that offer? What is the most generous kind of setup in a theater considering the history of the theater, the history of stage design, and the organization of sound within that visual frame of reference?

Hans Ulrich Obrist — You made a soundtrack—could you tell me about it?

Olafur Eliasson — I started by reversing the audience and the stage by installing a mirror that covered the entire stage. Then, I have suggested that the conductor turn around in the orchestra pit and try to conduct the audience, with the musicians following him. I am hoping to create an echo. The idea is that somebody in the audience may say something, cough, make a noise with the chair, or simply clap his or her hands. In turn, the conductor will ask the musicians to try echo the sound. So the musicians, like the mirror, basically reflect the audience—or rather the sound of the audience. Somebody may gasp or two people whisper to each other, both of which I imagine can be easily replicated by a couple of instruments under the guidance of the conductor looking at the audience. The musical “score” carries with it, of course, the danger of there not being any sound at all—if the audience decides to stay quiet—but no sound is obviously also a sound. It’s a sound-no-sound soundtrack.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — We’ve spoken about a variety of vessels in this interview. Before we close for today, I’d like to ask you about the idea of the museum or the art institution as a vessel. In the past, we’ve talked a lot about what art centers and art institutions need to be like to remain relevant in the twenty-first century. What is your vision of the twenty-first century art institution?

Olafur Eliasson — I feel that cultural institutions need to embrace temporality in a more productive way. 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.