

What we have in common is that we are different

MARIANNE KROGH JENSEN AND OLAFUR ELIASSON. Originally published as „What we have in common is that we are different“ in Olafur Eliasson: Your position surrounded and your surroundings positioned by Dundee Contemporary Arts (Scotland, 1999), pp. 14-19.

The following interview took place on a Saturday afternoon in February 2000 on the new Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, at a coffee shop in the shopping mall.

MARIANNE KROGH JENSEN: The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has, in very sharp and critical analyses of the consequences of globalisation, characterised shopping malls as spaces designed to keep people on the move, to divert and entertain them non-stop - but certainly not too long - by way of each of their countless attractions. They must not, at any cost, stop to look at each other, talk to each other, not spend their time on anything without commercial value. Is this something you recognise here at the new Potsdamer Platz?

OLAFUR ELIASSON:... imagine a space shuttle with beings that have never set foot on earth before landing right here outside the mall. What would they see? A space with one purpose only. I am aware that social relations in public space don't necessarily have to do with conversation, that it may involve just being in a space with other human beings walking and moving in various ways, with varying speed, in various directions and so on, laying itself open to decoding and communication. But what is at stake here is space being coded to such an extreme degree that it almost precludes any other function, inhibiting true social inter-action between diverse individuals.

MKJ: Now, of course it is trivial to criticise shopping malls in general, but on a more abstract level one could perhaps say that it would be interesting to have a space addressing itself – and spaces do address themselves - to many different modalities at the same time, over a period of time, so that the possibility might arise of the various movements, speeds and directions you mentioned just now. A kind of respect for the individual, or for groups.

OE: Exactly! If a space first and foremost stresses anti-social activity, where one turns one's back on the other, then we are objectified as humans. If space addresses itself as a generalisation in the extreme, a generalisation of our taste, of our senses, our way of orientating ourselves, then the conditions of individual freedom are constrained, or, one could say, the conditions for the emergence of individual, and hence differing, points of view.

MKJ: But what then? Suppose we speak of the subject and space making room for experiencing in different ways. What is our shared space then? What is it then that we have in common?

OE: What we have in common is that we are different. This is precisely the huge misunderstanding: that everything is conceived as though we were identical. Which, of course, consumer industry is totally aware of, for the more identical we get, the smaller a range of commodities we need. In the subjective space, as I would call it, the basis of community is that we each have our opinions which must also be the natural starting point for any equitable social activity. Were the opposite the case and were we objectified through homogenisation and pacified spatially, there might be a tendency for an illusion to arise regarding community, that we all think the same about something or other, and when something different is

encountered, the reaction tends to be negative.

MKJ: In Tuscany last year, when you placed lighthouses in five separate locations, so that the light from the lighthouses showed a different colour depending on where one found oneself in the hilly landscape, it was a case, not of homogenisation, but of heterogenisation, or one could say an address going in two directions?

OE: Any task, whether something quite concrete such as shopping, or whether just getting from one place to another, always implies a movement of some kind which may be more or less conscious. In continuation of this discussion, one could say it is that movement which I, in one way or another, would stress as being individual, both in relation to time and space as well as in relation to one's specific environment. When moving around in Tuscany, ideally anyway, one would take one's bearings from the light of the five lighthouses, and one could therefore, strictly speaking, step out of the existing road system. This is to say that I somehow shifted the way in which our surroundings are laid out for us as a quite specific set of bearings, thereby suggesting a different kind of bearings. This could certainly be construed as a notion of freedom, since the movement can obviously never be the same for two different people. If we move along the road in a car we are driving with the same definite speed, see by way of the same kind of headlights and from the same angle. All our senses are engaged in an identical framework. Hence I suggest a kind of model of orientation which to a greater degree is individual and so underscores personal as opposed to collective experience.

MKJ: Something I see as central to your works is that they always remain open and do not close themselves due to the use of traditional value systems. It is not a question of one form being better or worse than the other, or in this case walking as against driving, or the shopping mall as against trekking, but rather that a space is created in which to reflect upon the way we experience and a way that precisely changes from one experience to another. And a way that will always link various representational layers to the experience.

OE: The project in Tuscany contains several layers in that sense: you could say that it worked on a practical level, while the idea worked at a representational level and you had to know the concept in order to experience it at all. It is also possible that we sometimes neither follow nor reflect upon the subjective space because we are so locked into the patterns of movement and orientation we normally follow. Or that you follow the already trodden paths in the wood, because your footwear is meant for strolling in the city...

MKJ:... Isn't this also because we have a mental image of what it is like to go for a walk in the woods?

OE: Yes, I was just about to say that... It is just so complex that it's difficult to map out, and just our talking about it in some way standardises it. Perhaps this thing about orientating oneself lies as a horizontal surface. This surface is corporeal space-time, whereas another axis, the vertical, could be consciousness which, with all its millions of gradings, indicates the degree to which one is conscious of whether what one sees is a picture. I don't know. It almost sounds as if I have some kind of romantic idea of there being something prior to all these layers, like a kind of freedom, which is not my intention at all. The 'real experience' - an unfiltered sensing in which memory plays no part - I don't think exists. Perhaps it may rather be a question of a state of non-freedom. That's why I think it is important to look at the conditions of the subject.

MKJ: This thing about the body, the gaze and the image makes me think of the term 'double perspective', which I think originates from Merleau-Ponty. In the Tuscany project, it is not a question of a hierarchical division, because the object as such does not exist, but rather of a kind of inter-relation between the experiencing person and what is experienced. An exchange that turns back and ends up with the viewer once more. At another level the idea of a double perspective probably also indicates that we now slowly become capable of, if not liberating ourselves, then at least becoming more conscious of our perspectival appropriation of our surroundings, a form of appropriation which has otherwise been so dominant that we have often taken it for granted. That we, as a thought experiment at least, become capable of seeing from where it is we stand and look: the double perspective understood as a point of reflection.

OE: It is interesting to think that in a way a kind of dependency relationship exists, or at least a definite relation between senses and representation. At one end of the spectrum, you have the actual experience, where you as a subject look out at your surroundings. And at the other end, in total representation like in certain commercials, the image comes from without and you become an object. In between there is an infinite number of gradings, and it is in this context that I think the sensory-based experience may have a direct influence on where in the spectrum you find yourself. That is also why the glass façade of a building, for instance, doesn't just separate you from what is outside in terms of weather, but actually, by depriving you of sound, may transform the experience into an image of what is outside, since you now only have access to it through vision. One could say that there is a proportional relationship between the use of sensory plurality and the representational level.

MKJ: Within endo-physics, for instance, one works with a relative connection to the world, maintaining that the external position of the viewer is only possible in the form of a model and never within reality itself. Rather than being tied to reality we are tied to the model of it. I came to think of your frequent references to the classical measuring instruments, which, instead of providing a total insight into reality, comprise some of your many encounters with it.

OE: One could call them sensory extensions or mediations of the senses. There are several issues in the application of these measuring instruments. It is also about recognition itself... It is true that there is this fundamental, utopian human belief in conquering, in understanding and making everything conscious, and this is probably where I can identify with the optimism. The measuring instruments I make use of always have something to do with what we are normally capable of sensing, like an altimeter. It may well be that we can't see or sense how high we are above sea level, but if we rise high enough, we can sense it, because the air becomes thinner. To me it is a question of visualising our senses, making them evident through their instrumental representation: seeing yourself sensing.

MKJ:... and that is what, using a very current expression, could be described as being conscious of one's interface? It is a question if precisely by working with this enhancement of consciousness, one is also involved in shifting that interface or this sort of boundary. From action to interaction: what could be described as the data board needs to work in both directions, where the data works both as information received and as new raw material to be reworked and mailed. In many of the recent attempts to define a notion of space that isn't automatically locked into the Giedion space-time-understanding, reference is often made to the definition of space by Bergson and others where, as opposed and almost contrary to the more static notion of space as an autonomous timeless 'box' in which actions take place, space is created by way of movement, actually as well as metaphorically. That the very movement and its duration create meaning and space. This is, of course, a very simple account, but do you think it is a way of thinking that would make sense in relation to an orientation in space and in relation to an architectonic articulation of space?

OE: Yes, it certainly makes me think of some of the people working with architecture as purely forces & dynamics which, in the sense I am thinking of here, implies a certain social consciousness, because people in an architectonic space do predominantly comprise forces and dynamics. If you open a window there will be a difference in temperature resulting in A flow of forces moving in and out. But this is still very little compared to the flow of human beings coming in one door and out the other. That is maybe what defines space, the flow of people and the open window, and sound and light, the water taps and the radiator. It is that kind of ultra-functionalism that, primarily at least, is not at all about formal choices, since who says the door must be so wide? And who says it has to open in this precise manner? Who says that there has to be a door at all, when the whole thing is no longer about space anyway? Now space itself has also become a function of us, exclusively.

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