

In Iceland, building bridges for art

CURATOR Hans-Ulrich Obrist and artist Olafur Eliasson have been discussing the nature of collaboration and art for more than a decade. They met in the early 1990s and soon began visiting Iceland each summer with a contingent of other artists and thinkers to explore the

Backstage with HANS-ULRICH OBRIST AND OLAFUR ELIASSON

landscape and share ideas, in the hope of spurring creativity.

Their latest project, part of the Reykjavik Arts Festival, is a more formal version of the gatherings. Called the Experiment Marathon Reykjavik, it brought together more than 50 artists, architects, filmmakers and academics to demonstrate the intersection between art and science. Among the participants were Tanzanian architect David Adjaye, British musician Brian Eno, Indian artist Abhishek Hazra and Lithuanian filmmaker Jonas Mekas.

The two-day performance this month took place at the Reykjavik Art Museum, where an accompanying exhibition is on display through Aug. 17.

The forum followed a similar event last summer in London at the Serpentine Gallery, in a temporary pavilion inspired by Nordic landforms designed by Mr. Eliasson and Norwegian artist Kjetil Thorsen. Mr. Obrist is the director of international projects at the gallery.

The 40-year-old Mr. Obrist, who is Swiss, has organized more than 150 exhibitions. He travels constantly, inviting artists to bring their portfolios to his hotel lobbies and interviewing top artists from cities around the world in an effort to take the pulse of the global contemporary art scene.

Mr. Eliasson, born in Copenhagen in 1967 to Icelandic parents, is known for installations, photographs and sculptures that create environments dealing with the perception of light, nature and space. A major retrospective of his work, "Take Your Time," is showing at the Museum of Modern Art and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York. Among other projects, he is now building four giant waterfalls under the Brooklyn Bridge and along the Brooklyn waterfront, a public art commission that will run June 26 through Oct. 13.

We spoke to the pair this month at the Reykjavik Art Museum.

—Cathryn Drake

You two have a longstanding relationship with Iceland and have traveled frequently here together. How did that begin?

Hans-Ulrich Obrist: We met in the early 1990s when I invited Olafur to [contemporary art biennial] Manifesta. That was the beginning of our conversations about Iceland, and then later we started to come here almost every summer.

Olafur Eliasson: Iceland became a trajectory that we could share. I come here roughly once a month, being Icelandic myself. I used to have a house here, but I sold it to stay more nomadic when I'm here. Which is how Hans and I developed this nomadic stage of actually traveling through space rather than sitting in a space talking about it.



Cathryn Drake

Artist **Olafur Eliasson** and curator **Hans-Ulrich Obrist**; below, "Table Piece One" being performed at the Experiment Marathon Reykjavik by (from left) Sebastian Mekas, Jonas Mekas and Benn Northover.

Mr. Obrist: The visits became very regular after 1999, when I had a visit from Jonni [Sigurjon Sighvatsson, director of the Eidar Art Centre]. He said he was doing this think tank in Iceland and wanted Olafur and I to form the team and think how one could organize a journey in Iceland each summer. We thought it could be interesting if it was more like an experimental conference where you invite artists.

Mr. Eliasson: We brought together a group of contemporary art and film and culture thinkers, and we eventually just had a very long hang-out, playing football, eating, fishing, doing journeys and talking. But we did artwork, and we showed each other the projects we were working on. The time we spent on the road was productive. So we'd journey across the highlands, sometimes in the car, sometimes hiking, and sometimes we had a little plane pick us up on natural airstrips.

Hans has talked about the idea that although you return home from a place on the same road, you see everything differently, not only because your physical perspective has changed but also because the narrative of the journey continues forward infinitely, no?

Mr. Obrist: It goes along with the idea of intensely revisiting the same places, which has become, at least in my travels, an incredibly important part. I mean, I've been to China 15 times, to Iceland 15 times. To me that is more meaningful than going to hundreds of places only once.

You have said that Iceland as a place is part of the global dialogue and yet very local at the same time.



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land has fantastic people, but wins on the issue of landscape and such things. So I've been puzzled by the struggle that people have in pinning down the actual heritage, as if authorship is about belonging to a place. There is no reason to underestimate the importance of having a history and a relationship which goes beyond the length of your own life, and having families whether you are with them in the place where they are or not—this is what forms you and cultivates you and defines your opinions and so on.

In fact, everybody here seems to know each other and even to be somehow related.

Mr. Eliasson: Well, the fact that there is a size to the country that is comprehensible allows for thinking about space in a different way. It has to do with that you can somewhat relate to scale by a measure of temporality. You would refer to the kiosk as being ten minutes away—in a bigger country, like America, you always talk about the miles.

The other thing is that the history of Iceland has to do with the journey, which was always a question of time—it was never really a question of distance. The potential of the journey lies in what it allows for in terms of understanding and the narrative of the social world, which is where storytelling comes from.

The great history of American landscape photography, which is so rich, is very much about iconic pic-

tures. It's really about the representation of space rather than depth in space. So there is not a strong tradition of temporality there.

I find that in Iceland there is a deep feeling of social intimacy and at the same time the phenomenal landscape and harsh climate can be distancing, so that in the end you feel both things at once.

Mr. Obrist: I agree. I once had this amazing experience when we went to Eidar by car: I fell asleep for three hours, and when I woke up there was still the same glacier.

Olafur, the design of the Serpentine pavilion and much of your work seems to be inspired by Iceland's landscape.

Mr. Eliasson: Yes, but I don't think it's fair to say that this is just about Icelandic nature. The formal language in my work is very much inspired by natural phenomena related to Iceland and other Nordic countries. But obviously the language doesn't say anything by definition; it is very much about what you then say with this language, which is not about Iceland, it's about other issues. So even though art history has a tendency to focus on the form rather than the content, what you say must stand in front of how you say it.

People who saw the pavilion in London will know that it was about temporality, about physicality, the way that the body constituted spatial questions.

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