

»Espèces d'espace« – situations in contemporary art:

Olafur Eliasson, Rikrit Tiravanija, Qinyun Ma

HANS-ULRICH OBRIST,
eingeleitet von JENS E. SENNEWALD

Auf drei Positionen der zeitgenössischen Kunst gestützt, entwickelt Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Kurator am Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (MAMVP), von zwei Seiten seinen Begriff der »Raum – Dynamik«. Zum einen wird durch sein Vorgehen deutlich, dass Bewegung im Raum, das In-Bewegung-Setzen von Kunst, fundamentale Methode seiner Arbeit ist. Zum anderen wird durch die Künstler und deren Werke, die er beschreibt, erkennbar, dass und wie in der zeitgenössischen bildenden Kunst inzwischen ein dynamischer Raum-Begriff entwickelt worden ist, durch den sowohl ästhetische, als auch politische und theoretische Grenzen des Kunst-Diskurses verschoben und neue Terrains für die bildende Kunst gewonnen werden.

Bewegung ist Leitmotiv von Hans-Ulrich Obrist. »Obrist is a curator,« schrieb die Financial Times 1999, »whose ideas about exhibitions tend to arouse as much interest as the work of the artists he chooses. And this is exactly what he intends. Although he depends on museums as an operating base, he nevertheless delights in challenging their orthodoxies.«

Der Kurator bringt Kunst in Bewegung, indem er ihre Rezeptionsbedingungen verändert. Nicht mehr das immobile Werk, das im *white cube* auf andächtige Beschau wartet, sondern das mobile Kunstwerk interessiert Obrist, der sich als »Brückenbauer« zwischen Künstler und Publikum bezeichnet. In Flugzeugen der Australian Airlines ließ er unter den Passagieren Puzzles des italienischen Künstlers Alighiero Boetti verteilen. »Cities on the move«, »Migrations«, »Museum in Progress«, »Take me, I'm yours«, »Do it«, »eflux« sind Titel seiner Projekte, die immer mit der Bewegung im Raum zu tun haben, sowohl mit seiner eigenen, als auch mit jener der Künstler und der Kunstwerke.

Mit dem Stichwort »global« umschreibt er seinen Versuch,

»Kunst als Lebensraum neu zu erfinden, Orte zu schaffen, in denen man sich verlieren kann.« Obrist war damit einer der ersten einer neuen Kuratoren-Generation, die bewusst und reflektiert global agierte und damit zu einer Avantgarde der Globalisierung gezählt werden kann, die den Begriff und dessen Realität für die breite Bevölkerung wahrnehmbar gemacht haben.

Bewegung leitet Obrist nicht nur im geografischen Sinn, sondern auch im transdisziplinären Engagement. »Art&Brain« hieß ein Workshop, den er an der »Akademie zum dritten Jahrtausend« in Jülich organisierte. Dort, wie auch mit seinen anderen Projekten zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft, beispielsweise der von Jan Fabre herausgegebenen Zeitschrift »janus« oder einer Tagung mit NASA-Wissenschaftlern anlässlich einer Ausstellung von Steve McQueen im MAMVP, ging es ihm um die Erfahrung, dass, so Obrist, »jede Wahrheit von anderen Wahrheiten umgeben ist, die es wert sind, erforscht zu werden.«

Genaue Forschung ist die Vorgehensweise des Kurators, der die Arbeit mit Künstlern als pluridisziplinäre Erkundung der Räume und Möglichkeiten von Wissen begreift, als durchdachte »Flanerie«. Sein Credo gibt er mit einem Musil-Zitat wieder: »Wenn es heute noch Kunst gibt, dann taucht sie dort auf, wo wir sie am wenigsten erwarten.«

Der folgende Text ist eine Konstellation aus drei kurzen Texten zu Künstlern, die jeweils mit Raum umgehen, auf ganz verschiedene Weise. Raum wird als zu entwickelnder, bewohnbarer Raum verstanden, als Raum, der besetzt und bearbeitet zu einem »Denkraum« wird und schließlich auch als Raum, der bereits gestaltet ist und mit Rücksicht auf seine historische Dimension neu konstelliert werden muss, wie die architektonischen Räume in China, einem Land, das derzeit umfangreiche Neubauten realisiert und damit Architekten aus aller Welt anzieht. Eine von Hans-Ulrich Obrists Methoden ist das Künstler-Interview, dessen höchst konstruktive Leistung für eine progressive Theorie des künstlerischen Arbeitsprozesses er bereits durch einige Veröffentlichungen hat zeigen können.¹ Da die Gespräche mit Olafur Eliasson, Rikrit Tiravanija und Qinyun Ma in englischer Sprache geführt wurden, erscheint dieser Beitrag in der Originalfassung. Zur Überschrift hat sich Hans-Ulrich Obrist durch Georges Perec inspirieren lassen, weshalb die letzten beiden Absätze aus dessen Buch diesem Beitrag vorangestellt sind:

»L'espace fond comme le sable coule entre les doigts. Le temps l'emporte et m'en laisse que des lambeaux informes: – Écrire : essayer méticuleusement de retenir quelque

1. Vgl. Hans-Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, Volume 1, Mailand 2003.

chose, de faire survivre quelque chose : arracher quelques bribes précises au vide qui se creuse, laisser, quelque part, un sillon, une trace, une marque ou quelques signes.»²

A. Olafur Eliasson: From exhibition space to architectural space

The first occasion I had to work with Olafur Eliasson on an exhibition was for »Manifesta 1«, in Rotterdam, in 1996. And just after that, it was for a group show on the Nordic Art Scenes, »Nuit Blanche«, an exhibition that I organized with Laurence Bossé and which opened at l'ARC (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris) in Paris in 1998. Recently we were remembering these first experiences together, thinking in terms of generation and time, and reviewing this period that led to his most recent projects. I don't know how many phases there have been in Olafur Eliasson's work, or if we could even speak in terms of phases, but probably the recent Tate Modern project, the *Weather project*, and the massive popular success and critical acclaim it received triggered another phase, or at least in a way drew of line.

»I am surprised by the symbiosis of such a very, very big city – a mega city that is London – and a mega museum and a mega art project in the sense of the physical scale,« Eliasson said to me then. Thinking about the reasons for this success, and specifically about the press coverage it received, one can notice that a very large percentage of the press was not art press. An extremely high degree of the news press, for instance, was weather reports – the weather reports in many countries and, of course, mostly in England, mentioned the work. And, as you know the weather reports on the TVs are the most looked at programs, you know: tomorrow's weather. He remarked, »Probably these weather reporters were really happy that someone was finally doing something with what they are working with!« Eliasson's interest in the weather comes as he explained to me from the fact that »its great advantage is its profanity.« Weather is such a profane idea on the one side, it is something that everyone is trying to come to terms with in the most unspectacular and simple ways – just like putting on a rain coat on Wednesday and putting on sunscreen on Thursday. And yet, as Eliasson explained, the weather holds the most unbelievable or unpredictable questions: What is time? What is unpredictability? What is

2. Georges Perec: Träume von Räumen, Frankfurt/Main 1994, 115: »Der Raum schmilzt dahin, wie der Sand zwischen den Fingern zerrinnt. Die Zeit schwemmt ihn fort und lässt mir nur gestaltlose Fetzen zurück: – Schreiben: peinlich genau versuchen, etwas überleben zu lassen: der Leere, die sich höhlt, einige deutliche Fetzen entreißen, irgendwo eine Furche, eine Spur, ein Merkmal oder ein paar Zeichen hinterlassen.«

chaos? What is the unbelievable turbulence of our atmosphere and universe and all of these very large – existential almost – questions.

What has always really fascinated me in the work of Olafur Eliasson, are the processes which lead to the pieces, this incredible long term in depth research that he carries for the preparation of each project or exhibition. »The research for the *Weather project* was first of all open-ended« he told me. An important aspect of this research is, as he says, »to come to terms with institutional factors that are always obscure«, whether the institution is small or big: »how much influence will the context have on a project and how is it possible to negotiate that influence so that it becomes something progressive and full of potential.« So research is always, plural, multi-faceted: with the *Weather project* it was on the one side, classical research on meteorological issues: trying to understand what the weather is, and in particular, who is now working with the weather, and how they are working on the weather and why people are interested in the weather. This enters a psychology of the city and psychology of how people see the city and environmental questions of what these environmental questions are and who these environmental questions are for. But then also, it is part of the same research to challenge and maybe even provoke a little bit the institutional grid in which the project has to fit this. It is not institutional critique, no, rather what he calls »institutional evaluation«: introducing transparency for the user of the museum, the visitor, enabling people to »evaluate« the situation they are in: on the street, in the museum obviously, and, fundamentally, everywhere.

Immersed in this research on the way people relate to their surroundings (whether natural or cultural, such as institutional) Olafur Eliasson is one artist who helps almost rehabilitating the word and notion of »emotion« in the arts. He always insists on that point, saying:

»Our relationships are emotional. There is not a relationship that is not emotional. I think even though I favor the political aspect of art, I do think that there is a formalizing danger in a programmatic attitude that somehow excludes emotional beliefs. I think being emotional is good. By being extremely linear and programmatic – and I somehow have a weakness for that, I do like that very clear-minded sort of agenda – but there is very little space for emotions and it becomes formalized in its own reversed way. I do not know how to explain that exactly.«

This is perhaps exactly why every projects by Eliasson can keep you busy thinking about it for weeks, months, even years. Through his projects participation can be exercised, stretched, modeled, and evaluation is introduced as an active element in the participation. Eliasson had this very beautiful formula, he said :

»It is almost a leftover from what we have learned from deconstruction, not the formal grid that it put on us, but this potential deconstructive element in our participation which takes it into what I used to call this the third person point of view – but I don't think it is a third person point of view anymore – and it is a part of the participation in the first actual active participatory action ›enabling‹ viewers to participate and engage at the same time. I am very confident in art and, believe it or not, I am very confident in people and social responsibility. It is just not paying off very clearly at the moment but I think that I am fundamentally optimistic.«

Eliasson would make a fantastic architect. And he's maybe almost there, his art could indeed take over, well, not so much take over, but rather go into the realm of architecture. »I would personally like to do that. Actually, I would really like to build a house.« He said to me recently. The idea of functionality doesn't scare him.

With the show at Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo in spring 2004, Eliasson is returning to a phase in practice where he developed works which tries to challenge our conception of space using light and color as the main medium. He has played with the museum architecture of the Astrup Fearnley Museum, its collection of white cubes and classic galleries, having in mind the idea to see if the relationship the spectators have with the buildings, as users, can be evaluated or challenged by inserting lights, introducing lines other than the cubic, perpendicular lines than the Euclidean architectural dimension that the museum is based on. He has introduced a sequential experience of the whole exhibition and worked with a narrative, developing it by working on movement so that the show looks different depending on where the viewer stands. In Eliasson words, »the exhibition has some relativity« – »I am trying to deconstruct the space slightly, not to confuse but to make it soft, make it tangible almost – but only if you move, only if you go around, only if the piece moves.« Furthermore, Eliasson says that his exhibition is »like a little laboratory in which you go from one table to the next to perform experiments, each space presents you with a different question.«

Then like with a Russian Matrushka doll, it's a laboratory inside a bigger laboratory, since to follow Olafur Eliasson's projects and exhibitions from city to city, from museum to art center to residency for now almost ten years is exactly that: it is living a new kind of »la vie de laboratoire« as Bruno Latour said, going from one table to the next in a laboratory where the most interesting experiments with emotions, politics, utopias, life are constantly taking place.

B. Rikrit Tiravanija: The Land

Rikrit Tiravanija revealed at the beginning of 2003 his ideas concerning *The Land*, a large scale collaborative and transdisciplinary project taking place on a plot of land that Tiravanija purchased in the village of Sanpatong, near Chiang Mai, Thailand. *The Land* is a laboratory for self sustainable development but it is also a site where a new model for living is being tested out. Begun in 1998, *The Land*, as Tiravanija explained,

»was the merging of ideas by different artists to cultivate a place of and for social engagement. It's been acquired in the name of artists who live in Chiang Mai. We've been trying to find a way to turn it into a collective, and to have the property owned by no one in particular, but that's one of the hardest things to do in Thailand. We cannot be a Foundation.«

However, Tiravanija underscored that one thing is certain, »*The Land* is not a property.« To my question, then, »Is *The Land* an art project?,« the artist replied: »We don't want to have to deal with it as a presentation to the art structures, because I think it should be neutral; and, it's also one of the reasons why it's not about property.« *The Land* was thus started without the concept of ownership and is cultivated using traditional Thai farming techniques. In the middle of *The Land* are two working rice fields, monitored by a group of students from the University of Chang Mai and a local village. The harvest is shared by all participants involved and some families suffering from the AIDS epidemic.

A slew of contemporary artists have thus designed or carried out projects for houses or self-sustaining device systems for *The Land*: Kamin Lerdchaiprasert built a gardener's house, Atelier van Lieshout developed a toilet system, Tobias Rehberger, Alicia Framis and Karl Holmqvist worked on housing structures, and Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss gave Rikrit instruction from an utopic bus stop as they had photographed it in the Brazilian capital of Brasilia in the late 80s. Some contributions are structural in other ways: Arthur Meyer constructed a system for harnessing solar power, Prachya Phintong put in place a program for fish farming and a water library, Mit Chai-Inn develops tree plants to be later turned into baskets and the Danish collective Superflex developed a system for the production of biogas. Tiravanija described some of the inherent complexities to which the participants were responding:

»There is no electricity or water, as it would be problematic, in terms of land development in the area. Superflex has made experiments to use natural renewable resources as alternative sources for electricity and gas. 'Supergas' is using the land as a lab for the

development of a biogas system. The gas produced will be used for the stoves in the kitchen, as well as lamps for light.«

Tiravanija himself contributed to the occupation of *The Land* with the construction of a house based on what he calls »the three spheres of needs«, described as the following: »The lower floor is a communal space with a fire place; it's the place of accommodation, gathering and exchanges; the second floor is for reading and meditation and reflection on the exchanges; the top floor for sleep.« Finally, Philippe Parreno and the architect François Roche have begun their plans for a central activity hall that was built in spring 2003 and will function as a biotechnology driven hyper-plug.³ The Plug in Station uses nature to produce the interface: it will make use of a satellite downlink and a live elephant will generate the necessary power. According to Parreno, the project is about connection in a post-apocalyptic situation, but also about self-organization and self-sustainability. In explaining it, the artist traces his contribution through references to Mike Davis's book »Dead Cities« and Bruce Sterling's »Tomorrow Now«, in which a new challenge is underscored: »machines are not the giants in our future, kids. The machines are the ants. The machines are much more temporary than you are. They are not getting bigger, they are getting buggier. If you want to be giants, that's up to you.«

The Land is already in use. The curious have begun to visit. And, although there are currently elements in construction and others still yet unrealized, it is developing in density and layers like the sedimentation of the plot it sits on. Constructed of the complex exchanges that have, in some cases, begun between individuals in locations all over the world and long before Tiravanija staked out its territory, *The Land* demonstrates perfectly the »collaborational promiscuity« that interests so many of the artists involved. To that end, it is important as well that *The Land's* collaborative development is somewhat unpredictable, organic, and ultimately oscillates between process, object, structure, and exchange.

»*The Land* itself,« Tiravanija emphasized, »is not connected to anything and that's what's interesting about it.« And this can be understood in many ways. Above all, Tiravanija's initiation of *The Land*-project resists the normative and prescriptive aspects which accompanied many earlier utopias. *The Land* is a concrete Utopia, but it is also first and foremost a self-imposed Utopia, one that is not rooted in intransigent beliefs on how others should live. Thus, *The Land* stands as a pertinent illustration of what an utopian project can be once grand theo-

3. Vgl. <http://www.new-territories.com/hybrid%20realized.htm>, 230304.

ries have been moved aside: a feasible, practical, but even more importantly, subjective Utopia.

C. MADAspace

»Practicing in China often means doing things in a kind of blindness in a way«, often tells Qinyun Ma. And this is not a bad thing, because »as we all know, in China, failure is always positive«. The statement may be cryptic but it informs a lot about the practice and ideas of Ma, introducing two decisive concepts »accommodating to blindness« and »the use of failure« that turn to be very helpful when analysing and understanding his projects, both »alive« or »dead«, if we follow the structure of the exhibition.

Instead of the two notions that have been often used recently when speaking about China, and which are »the post-planning« or »the trans-planning« condition, Ma developed the term »rewriting condition«, which, according to him, corresponds to a period which offers a

»very luxury situation for architects because you can always find your own way to interpret the planning dogma and rewrite it without people noticing that. And if you're also equally honest about the problems you can actually invent or regenerates new rules, but for your own not on a planning level. In our projects we try very hard to redefine what's given.«

Here comes one of the most important parts in the methodology of Ma's office: writing comes first.⁴ The client always receives many letters in which the office addresses many issues, without even touching on visual matters. Letters is their medium in a way and I think, there should be one day an exhibition with only the letters that Ma's office wrote in the first stages of their different projects. »When you present your ideas in writing, you can slowly remodel the thoughts that are presumably fixed in the client or in the government's minds and lead them gradually to accept the project«.

Ma claims process and negotiation ; his practice he says is, that he's always and constantly looking for itself, in permanent definition,

4. Ma's office, MADA s.p.a.m. (s.p.a.m.=strategy, planning, architecture, media) is located in Shanghai, and was founded 1999. Today's staff counts 45 plus employees. Architecture, to MADA s.p.a.m., is a polemical act engaging a large range of realities and ideals. In China, the speed of change and the scale of operation dissolves all boundaries between planning, architecture, landscape and media. It is under these circumstances that MADA explores a third frontier where the bastard of their love affairs or debris of their wars are celebrated.

»never made but always being made«. In the exhibition this appears very clearly as he has tried to show how their »live projects« are always in the flux of movement: »a kind of chain of relations between the problems of the city to the problem of the technology and to the problems of the client«, but also in the dead projects section, which are presented following the idea of »reversed layers of archaeology of thought«.

Among the most interesting projects is the complex »S.E.Z. Wuxi« which was based on a very low-tech approach to a very large problem.⁵ »In China the larger the problem is, the simpler the approach gets«, says Ma. In this city, which used to be a very thriving place economically, the project was viewed by the client as a kind of commercial revival or renaissance tool. But the site was close to a train station, which often in China are places which generate vague surroundings.

»Our approach wasn't to return this undefined site to a block kind of Chinese planning Dogma, but to keep it that way and invent a building that could move through the site, recalling Peter Smithson continuous activity projects«, Ma told me. »The complex moves around the different buildings and places, and thus mirrors something which is happening everywhere in China at the moment, which is the occupation and activities in between the different blocks, the different buildings.«

It's of course striking how the Utopian architectural ideas of the Sixties, Smithson's ideas or the ideas of the Metabolists in Japan become a reality in China today. And I find it particularly telling and beautiful that Ma's show is opening at the same time as Yona Friedman's exhibition.⁶

Ma's projects vary from dealing with macro issues and trying to find the most obvious and simple answers to them, and projects that deal with micro-issues such as the interior identity of a private building but for which Ma's office can develop highly complicated schemes as you will see in the exhibition. But what's maybe unique in China is the situation which is never quite determined and the way projects that start small can grow and become bigger and bigger. Scale can change during the process of making the projects. Issues shift back and forth, from micro to macro in the same rhythm as the project.

5. »S.E.Z.« means »Shopping Entertainment Zone«, a picture of the construction site is given in the catalogue published by the Aedes Galerie, Berlin: MADA On Site, Berlin 2004, cf. <http://www.aedes-arc.de>.

6. MADA On Site, Galerie Aedes East, 6.2.-21.3.2004. MADA On Site is an exposee of China's urbanism today through MADA's collection of work over the past 4 years. Catalogue: MADA On Site, Berlin 2004; Yona Friedman: Une vie spatiale. Aedes Pavillon, 6.2.-7.3.2004.

One of Ma's yet unrealised projects is the »Science Park« in Guangdong, which was in this case a competition that they didn't win. The project was supposed to take place on a »wet land« and the idea of the client was to fill it and build, which is the most economical solution. But what Ma suggested was to use the dykes as a circulation line and to elevate the building in a kind of Constant way. And again, it was a project of an amorphous shape creating communication, lounging, and mix. But, as Ma recalls, the client thought, it was not suitable for a building which would be inhabited and used mainly by scientists. Because scientists are most afraid – that's what the client thought – that their knowledge and discoveries would leak. So they preferred to have many separated and closed rooms rather than a focus on circulation and gathering spaces, and turned down Ma's proposal and his vision to go beyond the fear of pooling knowledge: »We told the client about the MIT building, and about the »good reputation« that the scientists there had. We explained to them that if MIT had so many Nobel Prizes and achievements it was because of the building«, tells Ma. »So they chose a German office to build it of course«, he laughed.