

Move On!

An interview with Olafur Eliasson

Iceland gained its independence during WWII and many people in Greenland see Iceland as a role model for their future. How is the situation in Greenland seen from Iceland? Danish Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson has agreed to share his thoughts about Greenland's cultural state of affairs.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BORIS BRORMAN JENSEN

BBJ: I've got three themes or topics that I would like to discuss with you:

1. The significance of cultural hybridity and the potentials of intertwined heritages;
2. nature as a resource for artistic expression and a cultural resource;
3. architecture, design and works of art as catalysts for change.

If you want to release the energy that, in my view, is inherent in cultural hybridity, you need to first deal with some of the static notions of identity feeding the postcolonial trauma. So while I'm working on doing away with my own prejudices against Greenland, I would like to confront the theme of identity in Greenlandic culture that looks back through history in an attempt to define a "real Greenlandicness." I don't much care for the notion of a true cultural and ethnic origin, just like I don't care for the notion

of a true Danishness. There are many aspects to this discussion, and we don't need to go through them all here, but unlike the notion of true Danishness, the notion of Greenlandicness includes a sense of victimization. I think that in order to evolve as a culture, Greenland needs to discard this notion. Julie Hardenberg, for one, has worked with this notion in her "Move on" project. Do you think art can open other ways of defining cultural identity on a collective level? Can art establish other observation

points and offer a different dynamic?

OE: I agree that we need to get rid of our focus on the victim role that has always been assigned, directly or indirectly, to the Greenlanders. It's of course essential to openly acknowledge their strengths and resources, but that's not enough. I think we have to state clearly that Greenland has been neglected by Denmark. Instead of working with the existing social structures and developing

a school system, healthcare, and elderly care—while taking the specific context into account—they simply superimposed a social infrastructure onto Greenlandic society from the top down and left it at that. And then things collapsed. Although of course the issue is much more complex, since the Greenlanders have neglected their own society as well. Today the international community suddenly has a lot of political, national and energy resource-related interests in Greenland, so we can only hope that the new focus on the country's commercial potential can contribute to reforming the social infrastructure and, in particular, the Danish handling of it.

BBJ: What is the potential of art in relation to changing the dynamics of the victim role? Could art and the different forums of art find some strategies aimed at changing this fossilized image?

OE: Getting rid of the victim role is something that involves active inclusion—you need to show people that you trust them and work with systems that are confidence strengthening. The entire situation between Denmark and Greenland is dominated by the fundamental image Denmark has had of Greenland for so many years. Denmark needs to take an altruistic approach to Greenland that departs from the polarization inherent to the classically colonialist tendency to think in terms of "them" and "us." It's essential to address this and say that Greenlanders aren't "them"—they are us and we are them.

And this leads me to the role of art. What art and architecture have in common is that to a large extent they are concerned with transforming thoughts and feelings into action, building a bridge between thinking and doing. By taking a range of thoughts and giving them physical dimensions, it's possible to create a language that does not just consist of words but is also embodied and spatial—a



combination of the rhetorical and the emotional. What I find interesting is that the process of form-giving—if it is good—integrates social, political, cultural and value-related questions. That’s why an architectural office or an artist’s studio may be an amazingly resourceful system or organization. Nowadays, there is unfortunately a trend towards transforming feelings into forms independent of political, social and cultural issues. But earlier there actually did exist a strong tradition for the transformation of feelings into form in Scandinavia, which wasn’t just a utopian idea but was actually integrated into the political, social and cultural context. A chair by the Danish designer Hans J. Wegner was part of a social economy in which workers were provided with health care and insurance. This ethic was part of the idea behind a Wegner chair. The form of the chair and the knowledge that it was produced in a welfare state, where the manufacturers were responsible for the well-being of the workers, were so tightly interwoven with one another that one could say the form of the chair embodied this content. To me, what is amazing about a work of art and about the way art works is its socializing qualities. Or, rather, it is not the work as such that is socializing; it’s your ability as a user of a work, or a house, or a public square or an urban plan to work reflexively with this plan and actually evaluate the emotional and physical causal relationship you are a part of. In this manner, art has a spatial voice that is socially grounded and very activating.

BBJ: *If I could just return to the question of cultural hybridity and the possibilities of harnessing and reinterpreting the interwoven histories of Denmark and Greenland. The attempt to define an authentic cultural and ethnic identity has not been completely unproblematic, particularly not for the “lost generation” of*





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Greenlanders who, as a result of past education policy, do not speak Greenlandic. Is our historical fellowship a Gordian knot that must be loosened by a sword stroke, or are there other ways to develop and expand an interwoven common destiny? Does cultural hybridity, which also exists in Greenland, not have a vast potential?

Iceland is fifty years ahead in the process of breaking away from Denmark. There's no talk of lost generations, but a new, what I would call a very Icelandic and very global, very indigenous and very cosmopolitan culture—exemplified by a figure like Björk, and, in my eyes, by some of what you yourself stand for.

OE: Smaller societies and communities tend to have a very significant level of self-regulation, because the networks are so small that the response time is short. When the financial crisis hit Iceland, not much more than a week passed before we saw a flourishing of nationalism. Maybe they needed to lick their wounds and reconsider whether all the friendships they had formed across the world were actually good for them. Sometimes it may be good to withdraw a little and consider the basis on which we become part of an international society, and what the interchange of resources will be like. What will you give and what will you get in return? Of course, I know Iceland well enough to know that it did not give rise to a strong right-wing movement or some sort of nationalist trend. There was also a very strong need to reformulate caring and compassion, and that's of course a process that includes a number of hard processes such as evaluating your own egotism.

There's no doubt that it's incredibly important to know your own history and the origin of your language. Where does our way of orienting ourselves in space come from? What values are associated with having a certain history? This knowledge can of course be abused to create a hierarchy of what's right and what's wrong, in the sense that if you're not like us, you'll be excluded. Nationalism has a tendency to do this and that's what I was talking about in the case of Iceland. But it can also be used as a resource. To know where you come from and who you are can lend your voice—for instance, the voice of the Greenlanders—authority and make what you say much stronger. To be aware of the position you are talking from—the feeling of the particular place, the social context, specificity of family structures and empathy, community and the time you live in, of what's unique about your country—is enormously rewarding when it comes into contact with different political systems or cultures. It's unfashionable to speak from a locally

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grounded standpoint, and it may sound a little conservative, but I actually think it’s very important.

BBJ: *The second of the three themes I would like us to talk about has to do with nature as a resource for artistic expression and consequently cultural change. Nature is of course a very integral part of Greenlandic culture, but I’m sensing a change in the understanding of natural resources. People are waiting for big, international companies to arrive and start extracting unexploited natural resources like minerals, gold, oil, gas, etc., while the country’s natural panoramas are increasingly promoted for tourism purposes. But nature is also another kind of resource, a spiritual motor, and I think that this is evident in some of your projects, such as Your rainbow panorama, which may be regarded as a landscape or a nature spectacle installed in the city. Or The weather project, which again places the basic or simple natural phenomenon in a cultural setting. The same goes for The New York City Waterfalls. But in Greenland, you sense nature everywhere. Even in the center of Nuuk, you have a sense of being in the middle of nature. In Greenland, you are always surrounded by something greater, more powerful, incredibly beautiful and scary at the same time. You always feel like you’re in the middle of a “weather project”! Could one harness*

the experiential resources of nature as a cultural motor?

OE: I agree that nature is omnipresent in Greenland, but at the same time it’s hard to walk through a Greenlandic village—with its high incidence of alcoholism, child abuse, poor education, etc.—and then chatter on about their special sense of nature. It can seem very paradoxical. In a traumatized society, nationalist issues will usually be predominant—those things that are ultimately totalitarian and exclusionary. But if you can work with the resources, having a historical identity will necessarily also include the subconscious; what you could call “that which we don’t know that we know.” And in that lies potential. In Greenland there is of course also an inherent knowledge that cannot be readily put into words. It’s what makes Greenland an amazingly poetic society too. And the poetry arises, of course, from people’s relation to their surroundings. It’s clear that if your society is traumatized, you have to cut the link to your subconscious in order for you to just survive, but this link has to be revitalized. The subconscious and the tradition of the unconscious mind also help define what we do when we walk through a room, when we express our politics, when

we act as a member of a society, etc. It all starts with a sense of time. I feel sure that there are a lot of people in Greenland with strong resources, even though we very often hear about the ones who commit suicide. If I, as an artist, wanted to do something in Greenland, then I would ground my work in the resources available and in the context I was working in. I would try to articulate the need for an experience that supports an inclusive sense of self. Inclusive of others and, as such, anti-totalitarian, you might say. I actually think that this is what art always does. It’s a very basic property of art. And this is where this phenomenon of collectivity arises.

One of the greatest challenges, and this applies everywhere of course, is to not take for granted what we take for granted. The hardest part may actually be to re-evaluate what seems to be straightforward and how this “straightforwardness” is constructed, since it includes a considerable degree of self-criticism. What if nature is not natural at all, but actually cultural? The idea that reality is relative, that reality is a construct, is of course a well-known idea and a popular theme in art. There is also the fact that historically speaking

the contrast between man and space, the surrounding shell, the human and the clothes, the house surrounding the clothes and the urban sphere and the natural sphere, these relations are firmly and very closely connected to survival, to much more extreme weather conditions. If you can’t go to your neighbor’s house, and you can’t heat your own, your life may be in danger. And this means that it is a huge challenge to re-evaluate your most basic conditions. Often being able to leave the place you live in feels incredibly liberating, in the sense that you then suddenly start to evaluate your own values and contemplate the fact that you can feel that you miss a certain space, even though when you are in it, it does not appear to be particularly valuable, because you take it for granted. Probably going away is a way to do things. Another way is to get other people to come and look and then, being with them as they look, to see it through their eyes. When I visit art museums and look at pictures I’ve seen a number of times, I always enjoy being in the company of someone who looks at things differently in order to reflect on whether what I see is actually real or not, or whether I can see something new. That’s something we all know. When people try to communicate the feel of Greenland outside of Greenland, I think there is a tendency—and I’ve seen this a bit in Iceland—to only communicate it to the eyes, visually.

BBJ: *That it’s reduced to a postcard.*

OE: Yes. Unfortunately, the tourist industry is about the most dumbed-down business you can find, in the sense that that’s exactly what it’s about. The physical is not conveyed. So then, and I know this from Iceland, there is this tendency to work with a whole lot of visual stimuli in line with much more conservative or old-fashioned ideas of what space is, and it actually often ends up cementing what you were trying to get away from, i.e., the romantic, idyllic relationship between urban structure and the natural surroundings. Whereas what is really interesting is not at all how the space between the house and the mountain looks, but rather how it feels to walk from the house and up the mountain. And that feeling is, well, you could call it a bodily feeling, a physical feeling that isn’t just good but often also incredibly liberating. So the great challenge may be that such an experience is something you remember physically in the same way that you remember dance moves. The same applies to walking up a mountain from A to B where the space between A and B may be much more engaging physically than the idea of A and B. This delves into some of

the things that Minik [Rosing] talked about too, about how we manage to relate to our surroundings. Here again, you could talk of the subconscious because our sensory experience system, the way we feel our body in relation to time and surroundings, whether natural or architectural, is an experiential memory—it is bodily—which is much more emotionally attached to our body than what we experience when we go by bus to a vista for instance, where you can look out over a panoramic mountain landscape and then return to the bus. Through awareness of the global climate crisis, however, tourists, driven by the desire to see for themselves that the theories are true, act differently. They have established a travel activity that in a way underlines that if you want your feelings to be part of what you say, you also have to act physically. It’s similar with our lax attitude to the drought in the Horn of Africa. We would be less lax if we’d actually tried living without water or been to the Horn of Africa. That’s why the attacks by Anders Breivik in Norway seemed so absolutely aggressive to us, because we could physically place ourselves in the situation of the victims. You could at once understand how horrible it was, but you could also identify with the spatial setting, the situation, the social setting, the camp, the island, everything. It was physically recognizable, which meant that it was a much more traumatizing event for us in Scandinavia than the drought in the Horn of Africa. And it’s a bit similar with Greenland.

