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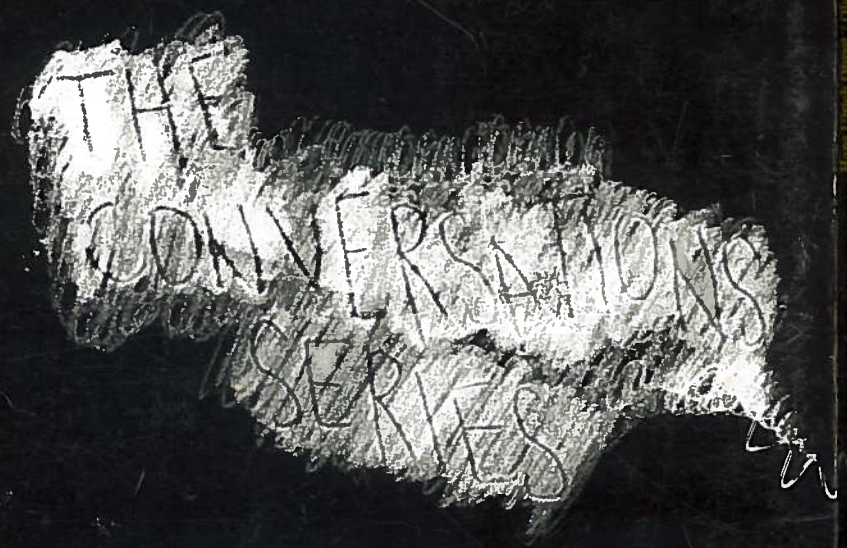

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln

Hans Ulrich Obrist Olafur Eliasson The Conversation Series Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König Köln

Olafur Eliasson 13

Hans Ulrich Obrist — The Conversation Series

V — The goose lake trail
Journey from Reykjavik to Eidar, Iceland, 2006[7]

Part 1

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Can you tell me where we are here? I'm lost.

Olafur Eliasson — We are on the reverse side of Iceland. South behind us, north in front. The wind, as you can hear, is blowing from north-northeast. We are not only on the rear stretch of Iceland, we are also behind the rest of the group. The ten other travelers are about four hours in front of us in two jeeps, keeping each other company. Having lost them, we are now on our own. We were delayed because we had to put our map reader, Alain Robbe-Grillet, on a small rescue plane. I think they are flying somewhere beyond us,

(7) First published in: *The Goose Lake Trail (southern route). Gæsavatnaleið (syðri). A conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Hans Ulrich Obrist* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006).

over the glacier. The air there is more dense because it is cooler, and the airplane can smoothly fly lower, so it is currently surfing the surface of the glacier down to Eiðar. This is also where we are heading.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **When you take pictures on a journey like this, is there a system or is it random?**

Olafur Eliasson — I don't really tend, or intend, to take pictures in this type of landscape because it is so enormous. A photograph can never really capture this feeling. Normally I try to look for a little setting, or a little stage … a more compact environment that your body can engage with physically. Of course, the physicality of a landscape like this cannot be depicted in a single photograph; the vast dimensions are best experienced by traveling through it. So, with regard to the endlessness surrounding us, the time it takes to travel through the landscape becomes our way of measuring its physicality; the duration of our journey becomes our eyes. In an hour or so we will arrive at the glacier, where the landscape will be on a smaller scale, and I'll take some more photos there. Here I just thought it was an appropriate place to take a picture of you—your white hat and that piece of sky over there, the cloud shaped like the hat. You know what I mean?

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **It's a backdrop.**

Olafur Eliasson — A backdrop, yes. Look at the glacier over there, it's very sunny.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **This is one of the biggest glaciers?**

Olafur Eliasson — Apparently it is the biggest glacier in Europe. It is shrinking rapidly, though, as are the rest of Europe's glaciers. But it remains the largest.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **What is it called?**

Olafur Eliasson — Vatnajökull.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **And it erupts sometimes …**

Olafur Eliasson — Yes.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **The catalogue says it might erupt today.**

Olafur Eliasson — An eruption might happen today, so we have to get beyond the lava tracks before they close the road. We can always try to drive over them. Let's go …

Part 2

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **Olafur, before we get out it would be good if you explained your survival car, because it has been transformed into a modified ready-made. You have added a hemisphere on top which makes it into some kind of Utopian laboratory. But it's not merely a survival kit, a tool with which to cope with the landscape, it's also your mobile studio.**

Olafur Eliasson — It's a little laboratory-on-wheels and it mutates like a chameleon into different shapes and spirits. Initially, everything about the car was easily understandable and ready to be decoded. It completely corresponded, I'd say, to conventional expectations of

what a car should look like … until the cupola entered the equation. The cupola was just to give it that dimension that it absolutely did not possess, namely the unexpected; it's the car's unpredictable reality. So the cupola, even though it is of course a minor element in the realm of the unpredictable (nor very large, either), closes what was once open and adds a kind of panorama aspect to the car. Now I can stand up in the back and have a look around; I can shower in the rain without getting wet; I can sleep here in the back and still have my little view of the sky. The car accommodates whatever kind of trip you want to have: we can bring a small kitchen if we want to have a chef-and-cuisine sort of trip, or we can just stock the usual astronaut food, which we did on this journey—much to our disadvantage, perhaps. We can really change it into anything. If we go fast enough it will start to fly—levitate, I call it. And it even sails if needed; hopefully this will not be the case. We also had a nice sound system put in recently. Maybe we should throw this song on. I think it suits the car.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **We should listen to that later, it's great. A Sigur Rós piece ['Bíum Bíum Bambaló'] [*The editor suggests that readers listen to this song while reading the remainder of the conversation*].**

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, exactly.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **… with elements of traditional singing.**

Olafur Eliasson — Here we actually just arrived in what is called Gæsavötn. It means "The Goose Lakes." There is a nearby emergency-shelter that is surprisingly

well designed; it resembles a piece of Swiss or Dutch architecture. There might be a warden inside because it looks organized. We are still on the back of Vatnajökull, surrounded by small lakes. I don't think there are a lot of fish here, but geese abound. It is a national park, or kind of protected area, and up in front of us these black mountains comprise the soil that the glacier leaves as it recedes. So underneath all this black soil there is ice. You can actually see the glacier right there in front of us … we'll get closer to the ice as we continue driving.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **Another thing you were telling me before is how you were once driving when a sandstorm struck, and you saw a group of people caught in the midst that you thought were stationary but were in fact moving on bicycles. So you were in a different time frame within the same space. I've just done an interview with Albert Hofmann, the inventor of LSD, and he recounted an experience in an experiment he performed during his first trip: while cycling home from his lab, he insisted that he believed he was standing still. Of course his assistant, who accompanied him because he didn't feel well, said that he drove like crazy. Is there a parallel, do you think, between this sandstorm experience and Hofmann's LSD trip?**

Olafur Eliasson — Well, the storm definitely does something to our senses insofar as our impressions of scale and proportion—our perception of reality in terms of "will we survive if we do this or that?"—are compromised. I wouldn't say that's necessarily dangerous, though. We might even be able to use such an experience as a tool, perhaps, to help later renegotiate or expose

the constructions of the usual dimensionalities that surround us. So even though we call this a landscape, we could equally dub it a geometry. As there are no straight lines in this landscape except for the hut and flagpole, we are, so to speak, in a kind of non-Euclidean universe. Who knows if time curves more out here than it does elsewhere? I think the time it takes to travel across this terrain, our one-minute interview journey behind the Vatnajökull glacier, is actually about bending time … it's about bending space; let's call it an anti-Euclidean journey. Ultimately, we don't know what we are seeing until we get home and rethink it all. The story you are referring to occurred when I was here a couple of years ago with Marianne, my wife. We drove through a one-meter high sandstorm and spotted what we thought were these crazy people standing in the thick of dust really far away. As we approached, we could suddenly make out something shiny under their hands. They were in fact on bicycles, sailing in the sandstorm, so to speak … levitating through this desert that we are going to encounter in a little while.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **It's also interesting that yesterday I wasn't prepared, so the whole thing felt like a horror trip, whereas today it's a great pleasure.**

Olafur Eliasson — Sure, but I guess all trips involve the notion of preparation. Because I've been here so many times, I tend to think that driving through this lava field as we just did is like meeting old friends. Or rather, it's a mixture of both: I am actually seeing new things

every time, and old friends as well. But now I've lost it. What did you say about LSD again?

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **The preparation for the expedition. You've elsewhere called it "a telepathic expedition". It's a lot to do with a mental preparatory set.**

Olafur Eliasson — "Telepathic" is really just an acronym for a laboratory expedition project: T-E-L-E-P-A-T-H-I-C is The Eiðar Lab Expedition Project And The Highlands Interdisciplinary Communication. That is what telepathic means: it is about sharing this sense of negotiation, being able to bend our surroundings by negotiating them. So, in a way we have this interesting situation where we are put in a certain frame of mind or a certain atmosphere by the landscape, and at the same time we negotiate this very same landscape simply by being in it and responding to the things we experience. That's it. Here we are.

Part 3

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **Olafur, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the repetition of your journeys? This is not the first time you've been on this route, for instance. Yesterday our driver, who is Icelandic and has done this route hundreds of times, said what strikes him is that each time he sees something completely different; he experiences the landscape anew.**

Olafur Eliasson — Certainly. Actually, this route has two versions: the northern and the southern. I've done the northern before—this I've already mentioned. They

are very close to each other, but the southern is more dramatic.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **This one?**

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, the one we are on. You are not supposed to do it without having other cars with you, though. The rest of the group happened to go in front and we have people in the area as well so in a certain way we are all together. But this is the first time I've been on this route as well. When you come close to a glacier, the temperature and quality of the air change precipitously. For example, in the mere fifteen minutes since the beginning of this interview, the wind has turned south, creating a very strange situation in which we have blue sky and sun overhead but less than a kilometer, maybe a half kilometer, in the distance, rainy clouds loom above the glacier. The wind therefore makes this little strip open for us. Not that I mind the rain, of course, but it's funny that since we started the interview we've entered another weather system, and here we are ready to sunbathe on the stones because it's getting so hot.

Part 4

Hans Ulrich Obrist — **The next question is about the micro and macro aspects of landscapes. I know that you maintain this ongoing project of attempting to photograph the entire topology of Iceland—a mapping project. And you referenced this in a way just before: we've stopped here because you are trying to find more niches in the landscape in a more confined micro situation, so to speak. So there's both micro and macro.**

Olafur Eliasson — Sure. One aspect about my excitement with this project is that it constantly varies, it changes a lot. To cover and document the whole surface of Iceland is actually more about the impossibility of creating an objective map … but equally about how cartography has fostered a third-person point of view on our inhabited space. At some point, for instance, maps began to be so precise that one could actually relate to them as a kind of time dimension, enabling us to say: "From here to Rome is a half year on horse-back." A map thus also became like a clock, a temporal calibration. So in my project the idea of mapping everything from the air, documenting minutiae, all the glaciers, all the waterfalls, the crevasses, the routes, curved roads and straight roads, all these mappings serve to destabilize our usual conception of time. When documenting things, you also apply a new dimension to them; I apply what we talked about before—the different ideas of space—and question the dimensionality of things. I think that large-scale photography, rooted in a discourse of "vastness," "grandiosity" and "endlessness," has to a great extent colonized the photographic medium. In contrast to this, a fantastic setting like the one we are presently looking at forms a typology of space which is completely relevant for the body, for immediate physical experience. One could actually live here if it weren't for the weather and so on. We could construct a veritable dwelling: a house here, the toilet over there, a bed there and so forth. So this is what I am documenting. It is not so much about the landscape in the abstract, nor about mediated photography as such; it concerns the spatial situations that a non-Euclidean landscape like this offers us.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — A habitat.

Olafur Eliasson — This is a habitat, absolutely, and a lot of different things for other people as well. It's a habitat against the sun with a blue sky … which is actually, maybe, problematic; the long shadow next to us is so voluminous on the black stones that a photo might not show it properly, because essentially an image is always flat. The image might thus make this space appear uninhabitable. But, on the other hand, considering it habitable could turn it into something more spatial …

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Experiments can fail.

Olafur Eliasson — And succeed, and create new languages.

Part 5

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Olafur, you were saying that it also reminds you of a little theater.

Olafur Eliasson — Well, it seems that I'll have to do a theater setting soon, and this is all you need. Of course, this is so classical.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — It also reminds me of the origin of parliaments.

Olafur Eliasson — Yes. This is just the place where we could sit down and sort out things, right? Doesn't it look like a parliament to you? Maybe this photo should be called 'The parliament photo' and these could be all the parliamentary members sitting around, all these rocks.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — What did you end up doing for Bruno Latour's show, the Karlsruhe exhibition [2005]? It's called *The parliament of things* [*Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*], and he was interested in you doing something about the very first parliament which, as far as I know, was in Iceland.

Olafur Eliasson — We ended up exhibiting the photo documentation I did of Þingvellir, which is where the first parliament and one of the ideas of parliamentary democracy originated. What I did was photograph all the crevasses—no, they're called falls, earthquake cracks in the earth's surface. There are some really fantastic ones there. Þingvellir is the place where the parliament assembled, and it is also where the eastern and the western tectonic plates meet. These falls are the result of the two continents shifting. So in a way we have a cultural institution, the parliament, that responds to nature in that both are in constant movement. Each in their own way incorporates a fundamental negotiation or disagreement, yet they never manage to fully break apart. The notion of the parliamentary idea, democracy and the tectonic shift was, I think, what made Bruno and Peter Weibel choose to use that image, because the exhibition was also about parliament's disruption.

Part 6

Hans Ulrich Obrist — We are here actually in a very strange sculpture garden or cemetery. It's not clear to me what this is because there are hundreds of small monuments. Sometimes in the Swiss mountains we have one or two of them erected by

workers, but here we have a huge installation of life and a complementary one of death. What is this?

Olafur Eliasson — I don't know. It might be something that began as a rumor: somebody starts doing something and then others mimic this, turning it into a convention … it's supposed to be "good." So this is one option. I guess the other one is the Icelandic tradition for sites to have qualities or spiritual powers of some kind, mythological powers. You know, it's not so much about the gods, but the elves and the small trolls that live here. They apparently cast a kind of curse on this place, so as you pass here you'd better put a rock on one of these things. This is probably the most likely explanation. Cognizant of the curse, people started doing this and now we are here, much later, without any idea of what curse we are talking about, so we'd better put a stone here, just in case.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — It's warm.

Olafur Eliasson — Are you OK now?

Part 7

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Olafur, I wanted to ask you a question about color. Reading Alain Robbe-Grillet's thoughts on color or its function in his films like *L'Eden*, he makes a number of strategic associations: red represents travel, or blue and white are the villages. Cumulatively, this produces a certain serenity, the pure sky, the flag of Jeanne d'Arc, the hatred of green. Shifting from Robbe-Grillet's Tunisian colors to our present journey; there has been a strong change of color on

our expedition as well. First there was that lava landscape, followed by the black glacier with the white underneath. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about color? One peculiar thing about this interview is that because it's been relatively spontaneous, the flow of the conversation changes at every interval … it's responsive to the landscape.

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, and without sounding too banal, the landscape is an improvisation itself. Our experience in terms of landscape and color is really crucial. I think we, and a few older generations, are the first to understand that one should be careful not to talk about color and landscape in universal terms. A sensory experience may be valid for you and me in the present, but the danger lies in imposing our excitement and the sensual engagement in our great journey on others as more or less essential qualities. I am passionate about discussing colors, and I don't think it's wrong to voice emotions if I've just had a moving personal experience, but the responsibility that I have, or my generation has, is to be able to talk about something amazing, a beautiful color for instance, without imposing these universal value systems onto our contemporaries—the way former generations did. So I am perhaps in a situation right now where I would like to keep the colors to myself.

[*break*]

Hans Ulrich Obrist — To continue where we left off, it's not only the landscape's changing colors, but the strange, disorienting, physical experience of walking on such different surfaces. Walking on the edges, walking where there is ice underneath,

walking on the lava … and now, seemingly, we are on some cave bubbles.

Olafur Eliasson — Yes, what we are driving and walking on are probably the roof-tops of what in the south of Italy would be called "trullis." Anyway, the consistency of the lava field and this particular variety of lava, the right temperature and so on, is such that it will not erupt. As far as I understand, these bubbles that we see result from gas or sulfur explosions underneath the surface, so there are probably scores of subterranean caves around here; we are basically walking on a city of caves right now. The thickness—let us just walk over here—this is the thickness of the roof; you can see how it has broken off like this.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Your previous link about the caves is fascinating. Walking on caves.

Olafur Eliasson — And the glacier up there.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — The glacier somewhat resembles a Gerhard Richter painting. Its deep black, lava-covered surface melds together almost as an abstract painting. Some of the white ice becomes visible as well.

Olafur Eliasson — Exactly.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — There is a link to painting …

Olafur Eliasson — Ah yes, absolutely. The white stuff we see all over the place is lichen, which is the only thing growing in this area. It's not exactly a plant, it's a very

low form of mushroom, but that's not the right word. Below the mushroom, even, is the lichen. So here we find the lowest of the low, and yet it's so vibrant.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Those bubbles that we're walking on, they make an interesting link to the bubble on top of your car.

Olafur Eliasson — [*laughs*] Well put! Yes, one bubble is as good as the other. Look at that big mountain at the back there. It is called Helgafell, a legendary mountain. As you can see, just a bit north of it, where we are now, the wind is blowing from the south … rather surprisingly, because when we left it was the complete opposite. Just two kilometers away we had the rain following us all the time, and now we're traveling in a time tunnel of sunshine.

Part 8

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Let's return to color. I'm fascinated by these yellow sticks and the fact that you've asked Joni Sighvatsson to leave us food in yellow bags. We haven't found a bag yet, but each time I see a yellow-painted rock I think it is our meal. This all makes me think of an objective correlative, an object which has a correlation with an act, either by prefiguration or by premonition, or by effect of a trace or sequence (this means that it's not a symbol). In a weird way those yellow things could be our meal, so it's a kind of premonition, but they are also our path. Sometimes we lose the path, and then through the yellow sticks we find it again. Can you comment on that?

Olafur Eliasson — Objective correlatives. Well, they are definitely sequential in the sense that we are looking for one and the moment we find it we immediately look for another one. It's somewhat like following the numbers on a clock: each stick becomes a visible, tangible marker of the time dimension. The interesting thing is, when you get lost, you look for the yellow sticks, you look for time. It's very funny how when you lose your sense of orientation, the space also gets lost and your notion of physicality is challenged; you are no longer guided by the physical frame, but you seek the time frame in order to regain your physicality. Isn't that an interesting phenomenon? So our yellow sticks are pointing out the sequential aspects of what we are looking at.

A similar phenomenon applies to the weather: we have the sun over here, which has now disappeared, and we have the rain behind us, sort of catching up. It can't really decide whether it's going to rain on us or not. The funny thing is that if it started to rain and we were to sit here as we're now doing, the water would rise rapidly and we might lose our sense of direction. So the weather also serves as an orientation aid for us. If fog or a thunderstorm comes, we might get completely lost and we would have to eat beef stroganoff from the rescue box. But look, as I'm talking, the sun is breaking through. Maybe we just drove too fast and it's now catching up?

Part 9

Olafur Eliasson — It's wonderful here. I'm afraid I'll have to take a photo.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — Take a photo, that's good … then we'll make Part 9, maybe with the photo. The title of your Tate project was *The weather project*. The weather, it seems, is also a medium of yours. Can you elaborate on this? In a discussion I had with Rosalind Krauss and Molly Nesbit some years ago, Krauss said that we're living in a post-medium condition. So the medium of painting as an isolated practice is no longer relevant. Ed Ruscha's medium, for instance, could be the car. I was wondering if the weather is your medium, and if you could talk a little bit about this? On this journey the weather has been a major part of the experience, almost as important as the landscape.

Olafur Eliasson — I noticed when we got here yesterday that we had an eastern wind; we spoke about it, actually. The eastern wind comes over what is called the Hofsjökull, the Hofs Glacier, and normally that means quite good weather the next day. As I woke up this morning, however, I was saddened to see it had turned in a northerly direction, which is usually a sign of dreary weather and I quietly anticipated a rainy day, without wanting to spread too much bad news. I think we have had a stroke of luck, though, in that we've traveled along the rain curtain; in the northern half of Iceland, on our left, it is definitely raining and in the southern half it probably is as well, although I can't say for certain.