IN CONVERSATION

Daniel Buren
& Olafur Eliasson
on the very same evening

In late March—indeed, at the very same hour—artists Daniel Buren and Olafur Eliasson were onstage for different speaking engagements in New York. Uptown, Buren was at the Guggenheim Museum discussing his newly opened “Eye of the Storm,” a large-scale installation featuring a mirrored wedge slicing vertically through Frank Lloyd Wright’s celebrated rotunda. Eliasson, meanwhile, appeared downtown at the invitation of the Public Art Fund, lecturing on his work—from the modest pieces that first garnered attention on the international scene some ten years ago to his more recent spectacular museum engagement, The Weather Project, 2003, at Tate Modern in London.

Even without attending these individual talks, one could easily imagine a number of overlapping subjects that would extend the simple coincidence of their timing. After all, the practices of these two artists—separated by more than a generation but commonly directed toward creating an elemental awareness within their audiences of the display situation—are rich both in similarity and difference, even providing a kind of object lesson in the opposite end. For Buren’s stripes there are Eliasson’s mirrored bands; for the former artist’s colored gels there are the latter’s Edmunds lights; for binoculars, kaleidoscopes; and then there are their respective architectural interventions and moves into the urban landscape—to say nothing of their meteorologically named museum installations. But on this particular March night, the most striking resonance was a pair of comments that could have been spoken in direct dialogue (at least it seemed so to the Artforum editors attending the events). Considering the historical place of institutional critique and the radically changed art-world context for his critical work in situ, Buren asserted from his uptown platform that “the total proliferation of the institution is as important to artists now as the discovery of oil painting was in its day.” And, as if by way of reply from his downtown theater, Eliasson posed a more contextual question, asking, “How should one deal with the megadomains of institutions today?”

As it happened, Buren and Eliasson were to meet the next morning, when they were able to expand on their virtual correspondence for this In Conversation, the third in an ongoing series of dialogues between artists discussing not only each other’s work but also contemporary art more broadly. Concerning the latter, it is difficult to imagine a question more pertinent than the one posed by Eliasson about the “institution.” Especially in the term’s most expansive sense. The previous decade’s theoretical interregations of the grand show and the increasing reach of the biennial circuit are lately shadowed by other, almost practical, questions regarding the exploitable scale and ubiquity of exhibition venues for contemporary art (presided over by a concomitant proliferation of professional curators).

What artistic strategies might be found to navigate a field in which, as Buren points out in the following conversation, “almost any beginner has a museum show in the first five years of his or her career?” Within the context of the historical avant-garde’s models of resistance seem not only untenable but irrelevant, and even the critical engagements of the ’60s and ’70s seem hardly applicable. We are living in a moment, as Eliasson asserts, when there is no “outside.”

Eliasson is hardly alone in his assessment. Indeed, that idea crops up repeatedly in this issue’s pages, as different artists seek to negotiate, or generate meaning within, the “total proliferation of the institution.” Among the younger generation, artist Tino Sehgal—who, along with Thomas Scheibitz, will represent Germany in the upcoming Venice Biennale—discusses his intentions to work within existing conventions while offering experiences itself as a product. (Interestingly, he also asserts that art fairs, themselves an almost parallel “institutional” system, provide an ideal context for his work.) Elsewhere, artist Seth Price, the subject of this month’s Q&A, seeks to update Duchamp’s question of how to create “non-art” when all forms of production (or even experience, as Sehgal’s work might suggest) are immediately or already absorbed by the market or institutional system. Price finds possibility in the nebulous, continually shifting structures of distribution technologies. Rudolf Stingel, meanwhile, seems not a new “outside” but a voicing on the inside, describing in his 1,500 Works a project in which he “erased” his gallery on the occasion of this year’s Armory Show.

Given these examples, the following dialogue provides a kind of keynotes and asks for consideration well beyond the immediate exchange between Buren and Eliasson. Their conversation is, in a real sense, ours.

—Tim Griffin
DANIEL BUREN: What I was trying to say in my lecture last night at the Guggenheim is that the proliferation of contemporary art museums today is a kind of technical revolution that may actually be as significant for artmaking as the invention of oil paint. As artists, we are in front of a new territory, a new relationship between those who produce something and those who make this possible and show the work. We must remember that not so long ago there was much less art, and exhibiting was very restricted. Even the most famous artists had museum shows perhaps every five years, whereas today almost any beginner has one in the first five years of his career—if not before! And there’s a second part to this dynamic, which I see as a member of a generation of artists in the late ’60s and early ’70s who raised a lot of extremely critical questions about the museum’s power. Today, I’m very amused by the fact that through its proliferation the institution destroyed itself in a way that none of us could have imagined. —DANIEL BUREN

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OLAFUR ELIASSON: In terms of this proliferation my fear is exactly what you describe, that showing in a museum doesn’t matter because the institution has essentially started to look like everything outside of the institutional system. But I also think there’s a significant difference in the way artists are using the institution today. Although I don’t know the ’60s and ’70s firsthand, during the ten years I’ve been active there has been a tendency, as far as criticism of the institution is concerned, to reinvest or reinvent meaning and responsibility within the institutional framework. I don’t know if you can call it “critique,” because that word refers most strongly to the ’60s project of subversive engagement with the institution. But nevertheless, I have been increasingly looking at what’s actually going on when somebody engages with art inside an institution and what kind of frame the institutional system offers for that situation, as well as what potential that situation has in a broader perspective afterward. In a museum, you’re looking at two things. You’re interrogating your surroundings, and you’re also evaluating the means with which you’re interrogating your surroundings. The institution as such has the potential for this kind of self-consciousness, which the rest of society isn’t interested in. Of course, that’s because the rest of society is a capitalist democracy that’s about consumption, which isn’t supposed to be reconsidered as you’re doing it. The value of a project like yours, Daniel, is that over the years you’ve engaged with the system and you’re still evaluating the very nature of that engagement. I think this can only happen in a few places, and the museum is one of them.

DB: Yes, but with the exception of those remaining few, the institution has spread itself so widely as to lose its power and authority, so the critique has to go somewhere else. OE: But I don’t think museums really lost their authority; they just shifted from critical authority to commercial authority. I think they reorganized themselves to a great extent to operate within a structure of corporate authority, becoming good places to rent for sponsor dinners or weddings, so, as you say, it’s a meaningless context in which to perform critical exercises. There’s an assumption that the four big museums you mentioned tend to be more responsible, because they have the means to be. Yet they’ve also been the first to wholeheatedly embrace the notion of brand-
ing. At first I didn’t really mind. Why shouldn’t a museum brand itself? But very soon I realized that the “engagement with my work was being co-opted by a large museum. You were having, for example, a Tate “experience” when looking at The Wastie Project. This suddenly changed the idea of what it means to see and to be self-reflexive or introspective while doing so. The problem becomes what happens to the body of the visitor. Where’s society now? We still use our sense to define our surroundings, rather than just being defined by our surroundings by means of the commodification of our bodies? I was hoping for the moment could be the place where your senses, your awareness, would actually have a critical potential. But if the museum brands this experience, it’s no different than going to Macy’s. This is how I now the institution’s loss of potential, and the four big museums are at the forefront.

OE: But you understand that there’s a paradox here. While it’s true that everything has been increasing in the last twenty-five years—there are many more museums, more artists, and a much greater public—this is also the reason for the fatigue of the entire structure.

DB: Well, even though it’s critical or sceptical, I still love to have museums, and I think the extreme growth in attendance and exhibition space is a very exciting development. The kind of social-democratic project of the Pompidou, for instance—the idea of giving art to the people—inspired a lot of European and American museums. But now this concept has to some extent become obsolete, and the reason for building museums is no longer derived from this kind of social-humane project.

OE: You know, finally enough, the explosion of these museums was not instigated by public demand but by politicians and rich corporations. We know exactly who pushes to make a new museum in a place like Bilbao or Bregenz, and they do it with the idea of building something prestigious—not just to please the fifteen local artists.

DB: Yes, there’s the tendency that museums are turning into palaces by Zaha Hadid or Frank Gehry, and even though I had fun doing the Turbine Hall project at Tate Modern, I still prefer working within a more domestic scale, like the Louisiana Museum in Denmark or the Menil Collection in Houston. At least in these museums there’s a relationship to the life that you normally live spatially.

OE: My philosophy is that I could engage a kitchenette or a cathedral, but the work has to be in scale with the space.

DB: Yes, I’ve always been impressed with your ability to embrace an almost encyclopedic range of ideas, and it seems that there’s nowhere you couldn’t work. This is really interesting in the sense that you’ve created an approach that can apply to any situation—and does so quite successfully.

OE: Well, so I come back to the large museums. I’m extremely doubtful about some words that have become spectacular for their own sake. But I agree to make a work in a place that’s a potenti; it’s spectacular, my work just has to have a least an aspect of that, and if I try to escape it, I’ll show something that has nothing to do with the space. If you do something at the Guggenheim, you’re working in one of the most spectacular museum spaces, even more so than the Turbine Hall, which is just gigantic. This is not to say that you can’t make a conflict or a contradiction or even open up a question about the space. For example, I think that one of the aspects of my show at the Guggenheim is that when you see the building by itself, the spiral always turns, but with the mirrored piece in the coutn, the spiral doesn’t turn anymore—it breaks. In a way, the mirror opens up a question about this kind of circularity.

OE: You know it’s true, the spiral is a kind of endless movement and one would think that the movement would continue in the mirror, but the idea of mirror actually ruins that spiral, because the reflection fills in the other way. So the show becomes about the disparity between what you’d expect and what actually happens. The geometry of the space is not reflected—you basically turned the building around or tore it apart. But oddly enough, I think the Guggenheim is actually a very domestic space after all, because as you walk in the spiral, you have plenty of time to conceive of the whole space, and now that so many other museums are so enormous, this one doesn’t feel that big at all.

DB: Yes, it’s still a modest, human space.

OE: Which I think is a great quality of that space—it’s actually accessible. But instead of then saying, for instance, that a space like the Turbine Hall isn’t accessible, I came very quickly to understand it by looking both at the space itself and at the mistakes other artists had made there. Some had actually tried to challenge the space within an almost domestic frame of reference, doing almost classical or traditional objects. But sometimes the tools with which you are forced to work are different. At the Tate, one way I was able to understand the scale was by interviewing the architect and the people who work there, since they knew the space quite well. Sometimes with larger insti-
tions one also has to be more resourceful in terms of making them realize that it's in their interest to create the best work of art possible. And if you're lucky, as I was at the Tate, the museum staff are completely behind the project, and then a very large space can become accessible to work with or can suddenly be challenged. Does that make sense?

DB: Yes, absolutely. Many people got the feeling in the early '70s that I was one of the very violent opponents of the institution. But even at that time, when I spoke or wrote on the subject, I always said take great care, for the artist and the institution are linked together; we're part of the institution. So it's exactly what you said about the help of the Tate. When you're invited to do a show at a museum, the people who invite you want you and support you, which normally means that your work is going to be as excellent as it can be. Then if you're critical of the institution, people will say, "So what are you doing in this institution? You work so well there."

But of course! You're invited by people like you, people who admire you and probably share your critical position. So you're fighting against a bloc, but ironically inside this bloc you have a lot of friends who have the same attitude. It doesn't exist, an artist who shows in a museum without anyone warning him there, so it's not really a contradiction.

OE: I think this is an important question, because I have to be the first to admit that museum shows have had a major impact on the development of my work, and a lot of it wouldn't have been possible without the institutional framework and funding. But one should also understand that the idea that I'd otherwise be working alone in my studio is kind of obsolete, given my practice, in the sense that I make the work for the institution, with the institution. As you were saying, Daniel, it's not an oppositional, academic, avant-garde idea, it's a discussion that happens very much within the institutional system. But I don't see this as a sacrifice. I'm not outside. There is no outside. Even the works outside of the institution are now a part of the institution in that sense.

DB: It's interesting what you say about the outside, because things moved there very quickly in the early '70s. I remember in '73 the Stedelijk Museum wanted to make a group show called "Outside the Walls" or something like that, which entailed inviting fifty artists to work in the street. They offered me billboards around the city and the sides of trains as sites. I wouldn't do the show, of course, but it was the only one to refuse. The museum understood something that was happening, and in a naive way it was a nice idea—but it was also stupid! I think this was the first very strong attempt by an institution to be up-to-date and say, "Now that artists seem reluctant about showing on the museum's walls, we're going to make a show in the streets." Today it's much subtler. The institution increasingly organizes exhibitions that can be anywhere—in the city or countryside. One of the most grotesque examples of this, back in 1986, was an exhibition in the homes of collectors in Ghent, which showed the panic of the institution, running as quickly as possible in order to survive! But it's always still the institution in some way.

OE: Really, it's useless to try to pinpoint what's inside or outside of the system, because drawing that line doesn't take our thinking any further. It just doesn't matter anymore. I think the interesting question is what impact art can have on society, and the institution is one of the main communicators of that. I'm not saying that art then has to be dogmatic or have an agenda. I'm just saying that it should have some kind of impact. It might have a negative impact, but at least it does something.

DB: Speaking of working outside, I want to address the question of memory in some of your works, like Green River 1909–11. Although the writings and interviews in your catalogues sometimes refer to earlier works of art, I am very struck by two specific examples for which I have seen no references. One is the piece you did on the windows at MOMA (Seeing Yourself Obling, 1961). I'm sorry to say this, but I did exactly the same piece, which involved mirrored stripes glued to a window, in 1979. Of course, I have no proper ownership of the stripe, nor of the windows or the mirrors, and you may not even know this work of mine. But there's also the action of coloring the river, which was done several times exactly the same way by an artist from Argentina called Nicolás García Uribe, and I've never seen any reference made to him either. I understand a work can be repeated, but my question is how a real connection like this can be completely lost to
memory. I'm intrigued by this situation, which is certainly limited to your work alone. But were you aware of these earlier pieces? And whether you were or not, why do you think people don't speak of them or make these connections, as though they wanted to block out certain precedents or ignore them?

**DE:** It's interesting that you mention this, because I never really considered my piece at MoMA to be about the stripes.

**DB:** I'm not speaking just about the stripes but about the use of the mirror on top of the glass.

**DE:** Well, I think that coming from different content, we've arrived at the same form. Of course, form always refers to content, and I completely agree that the discussion around the piece should make reference to formal connections. But my interest at MoMA was in what it means to stand within the museum, to look at the so-called reality outside, and to think of the window as a kind of interface. I've been very interested in these ideas for some time. My aim was to make a semi-transparent surface that would allow one both to see the institution and to look through it. So, formally speaking, that is very much like the stripes you did, which I didn't exactly know, but whether I knew them or not doesn't mean anything, since I came to the same form from a completely different kind of content. As for Green River, the initial idea was actually about the experience of urban space, and the best river I wanted to do was in Berlin. I have since come to know about this Argentine artist, and the way I understand his project now is that it is about the environment and documentation, so his artworks were in fact the photos of the river. But I don't think anyone can colonize form in the sense that it has ownership. I think artists—and we set it all the time—arrive in very different ways at the same form, which takes on different meanings depending on where it comes from and who comes to see it. But this doesn't mean that one cannot be responsible, and had I known about Uriburu I may or may not have done the project the same way. But there is also a Japanese artist who did red rivers. There are other areas who did water blue. I think we will increasingly see the same forms becoming completely relative in terms of content.

**DB:** Yes, I've based a lot of my thinking on the idea that we never really invent anything. We are sometimes good catalysts for things, which places a lot of question marks around the term of "authorship," but I'm still struck by the lack of memory even over such a short period, and I think it's crucial to speak about these things, if only briefly.

**DE:** I was recently in Warsaw in the apartment of the artist Edward Krasinski, and I saw a piece of yours with stripes on the window. But it never occurred to me that a piece like this might have anything to do with my stripes on the glass at MoMA, for instance. There are formal similarities, but I think there is a great difference in content. I am much more interested in perception and experiential issues and how they apply to spatial questions, which again apply to the body. The problem for me though, can be that people tend just to say about work, "Oh, it's about, experience, it's phenomenological." And the work is justified as an isolated event, not having anything to do with anything else. In fact, I think that throughout the '90s phenomenology became a tool to justify a new kind of essentialism—especially coming out of Scandinavia, where it became a very strange way of justifying the northern light as a kind of logo for the good life. Phenomenology became a bit totalitarian, in the sense that people used it to lay out the rules for the good life in a kind of post-social-welfare model. So it's ambiguous, and I'm sometimes afraid when someone comes up with a "phenomenological solution" to my work, because it's a contradiction that phenomenology would actually come up with a solution. Quite the contrary, I think the potential of phenomenology is that it introduces a kind of relativity to our experience. There's a social aspect to actually allowing you to change your own surroundings by means of your actions. You become essential and central instead of being in the periphery and organizing yourself around a fixed center. For me, as long as phenomenology is not some holistic, essentialist project, then I'm very challenged by it.

**DB:** I really agree with what you've said. For me, phenomenology is related to something very precise within particular situations; it's not something per se. So I pay as much attention as I can to the fact of the viewer and to understanding the existing qualities of the place where the work will be seen, as well as to the social relations that exist at the time something is shown. I think all of these phenomena are part of the

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work, so the connection is not only with the space but also with some idea that I want to reinforce or show. For example, the idea of using binoculars on the roof of the building to see striped flags throughout the city was also a way of playing with what we do in a museum. The museum is a platform to see, but sometimes we don’t actually see it so well. So, turning your back on the museum to look through the binoculars was a metaphor for this, but it was also about the idea of taking the museum as an instrument for vision, which is one possible definition of a museum. There was a kind of dialectic between the museum as an instrument and an actual optical instrument, which disappears when you look through it. Which is absolutely never the case with the museum, which, as an instrument to see objects and things, always shows itself at the same time.

OE: I have used these kinds of optical instruments in various ways as well, and obviously my main interest comes out of perception or the cognitive aspect of what it means to see. I’ve been very curious about working with the eye as a tool and the brain as a construction and a product of your own history, rather than its kind of objective, natural truth. That said, a kaleidoscope suggests a compound way of seeing space, and I think it allows for an almost psychological interrogation of your own vision. I have tried to integrate the kaleidoscope, not unlike your projects, into the physical frame of the exhibition, such as a window or a door or corridor or even just something small that you can take under your arm and occasionally look through. I think the interesting thing about seeing devices is that a lot of them date from 1820 to 1880, when they were first used as toys and became almost emblematic of the modern notion of your body being scientific and not of God. In this way, these optical tools are as much about demonstrating your body, or the body, as something that is actually physical. This is another instance of how very different ideas end up with the same form, and I actually think it’s an asset, that the same piece of glass can take on a different meaning at a different time in a different context.

DB: Speaking of this, I’m struck by another example of the same form being seen in different ways. I think my generation, or maybe the one before it, was saying very insistently that a cube is a cube, a piece of wood is a piece of wood. And a cube, a piece of wood is a piece of wood, right? And I think we wanted to reduce the artwork to its materiality or shape or structure—an attempt to get away from romanticism and illusion. And yet we saw in the late ‘60s or ‘70s a reversal of that: An artist would take a long piece of wood and give it a title like “The Boat.” Or he or she would say that the cube was a mountain or a sun on the horizon or something like that. I don’t want to say that my work is never metaphorical in this way, because things happen that I can’t control. But if something gives me this feeling, I do everything I can to eliminate it. What I want to say is that, for me, it’s not enough to use the same piece of wood and to name it “Boat,” in order to change it from what the Minimal artists taught us by calling it, say, “Wood Piece.” This just turns a once-advanced idea into an academic joke.

OE: I don’t have such a big problem with using a metaphor so long as the spectator is aware that there’s one at play. The metaphor might not lie in symbolism as you would normally think, but it could lie in a formal sequence of spaces that develops over time and acts as a metaphor for the organization of urban or private spaces. Or it might lie in your ability to recognize certain structures and the machinery with which a particular phenomenon is generated, as, for instance, when a scaffold can be a mountain down which a waterfall runs. This is very obviously a metaphor, because everybody can see it’s a scaffold and not a mountain. But everyone can also see that this is not just about a mountain but maybe some broader idea of landscape. So I actually take great joy in playing around with these things, but I try to not disguise them. People have to know there’s a metaphor at work, or I haven’t succeeded in my project. I don’t want to patronize the spectator.

DB: I think where you’re very smart is that you play with all of this, that you show the trick and the illusion. That’s a very positive aspect of your work, which saves it from falling into the kind of ecological romanticism one sees today. You dismantle the illusion at the same time that you build it.

OE: But ultimately, as you mentioned, there’s something that we can’t control, and whatever I say may or may not have any consequences because in the end I’m not standing next to the piece and the spectator. Naturally, some people will walk up to it and say, “Oh, this reminds me of my childhood”; another person will say, “This reminds me of Daniel Buren”; or another says, “Oh, I see, this is about perception.” This will always be the case, but I think we should be pleased that it’s so. No situation is shaped by form alone, the expectations and memories people bring with them when they look at things are also brought to bear. The content isn’t a static thing in the space; it depends on how you use the space. I’ve looked at the ‘60s and ‘70s in this way, and I think this is also what you’ve been fighting for, John—in the notion that we actually create our own surroundings by being engaged with them, that people actually matter.