

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on February 14

# OLAFUR ELIASSON

## IN REAL LIFE

Sponsored by



It is an honor for me to introduce the exhibition *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life*, in which the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, with the support of Iberdrola, is offering an exhaustive survey of the oeuvre of one of the most important artists working today. This show includes some of his most important works that have already been shown, as well as new ones that were created just for this exhibition in which he reveals his profound commitment to society and the environment.

Eliasson has taken the role of the artist beyond being a presence in galleries and museums to give it a multidisciplinary perspective in conjunction with professionals in such disparate fields as science, architecture, business, politics, dance and cooking. This Scandinavian artist uses his works, which encompass painting, photography, sculpture and large installations, to inquire into the relationships between the real and the artificial, perception and experience. His work stands out for putting viewers at the core, allowing them to delve into many of the challenges facing our society, and offering them different experiences which entail, in Eliasson's words "taking part in the world."

One of these challenges, which is also central to Iberdrola, is the need to promote sustainable development and act to stop climate change. Indeed, many of the works in this exhibition are related to the environment and sustainability, drawing from nature and its elements to make them possible. The artist exposes viewers' senses to materials like wood, water and moss so that they can feel the nature that humanity is destroying.

In recognition of his efforts to promote people's awareness of the effects of global warming, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recently appointed him a Goodwill Ambassador for Climate Change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's).

Given all the above, Iberdrola is very pleased to promote this exhibition. And with fantastic shows held by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao like this Olafur Eliasson retrospective under our belt, we will continue to promote and disseminate the artistic and cultural heritage, which is also an integral part of the growth and evolution of our society.

I encourage all visitors to allow themselves to be inspired by Eliasson's inquiries into reality and perception, which also urge a reflection on our impact on the world. And I would like to conclude by acknowledging the outstanding work of the Museum's professionals to make this wonderful show possible, an exhibition that will undoubtedly be one of the most popular this season.

Ignacio S. Galán  
CEO of Iberdrola

*Olafur Eliasson*  
*In real life*

- Dates: February 14 through Autumn, 2020
  - Curators: Mark Godfrey, Senior Curator, International Art, Tate Modern, and Lucía Agirre, Curator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
  - Sponsor: Iberdrola
  - Exhibition organized by the Tate Modern in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
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- The exhibition of around 30 works created between 1990 and 2020 challenges the way we navigate and perceive our environment, leading us to reflect on the urgent issues of today.
  - Central to Eliasson's artistic practice are his concern with nature, inspired by time spent in Iceland; his research into geometry; and his ongoing investigations into how we perceive, feel about, and shape the world around us.
  - Eliasson's practice extends beyond making artworks and exhibitions to include public interventions, architectural projects, and advocacy.
  - Outside the Museum, a waterfall more than eleven meters tall, constructed from scaffolding and pumps, draws viewers' attention to this "constructed nature" in an urban setting.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Olafur Eliasson: In real life*, a survey of the career of Olafur Eliasson (1967), one of today's most prominent artists. Through around 30 works created between 1990 and 2020 – including sculptures, photographs, paintings, and installations – the exhibition challenges the way we navigate and perceive our environment, leading us to reflect on the urgent issues of today.

Eliasson's art derives from an interest in perception, movement, embodied experience, and feelings of self. Central to his artistic practice are his concern with nature, inspired by time spent in Iceland; his research into geometry; and his ongoing investigations into how we perceive, feel about, and shape the world around us. His practice extends beyond making artworks and exhibitions to include public interventions and architectural projects.

Eliasson's Berlin-based studio brings together a diverse team of skilled craftspeople, architects, researchers, chefs, art historians, and specialized technicians. It is a place not only for artistic creation but also for encounters and dialogues with cultural practitioners, policymakers, and scientists. Convinced that art can have a strong impact on the world outside the museum, Eliasson has created solar lamps for off-grid communities, conceived artistic workshops for asylum seekers and refugees, created art installations to raise awareness of the climate emergency, and in September 2019, he was named Goodwill Ambassador for the UNDP. "Art is not the object but what the object does to the world."

## OVERVIEW OF THE EXHIBITION

Outside the museum, a waterfall more than eleven meters tall, constructed from scaffolding and pumps, cascades into the pond behind the museum, conjuring the same sounds and appearance of a waterfall in nature. This work shows Olafur Eliasson's fusion of nature and technology and leaves the mechanism behind the work exposed to view, drawing visitors' attention to the "constructed nature" in an urban setting. This piece is a continuation of the *Waterfall* series previously displayed in cities like Sydney (1998), New York (2008), São Paulo (2011), and Versailles (2016).

### Gallery 205

*Model room* (2003) contains around 450 models, prototypes and geometric studies of various sizes. Together, they form a record of Olafur Eliasson's work with his studio team and his long collaboration with Icelandic artist, mathematician and architect Einar Thorsteinn (1942–2015).

Between 1996 and 2014 Thorsteinn and Eliasson collaborated on many projects and researched the geometric forms, symmetries and ratios that structure a number of Eliasson's sculptures and pavilions. These models are made from a range of materials, including copper wire, cardboard, photocopies, Lego bricks, wood, foam and rubber balls. For many years, they served as a 'reference library' for Studio Olafur Eliasson. Now, *Model room* is held at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, but the studio, and particularly its design and geometry teams, continues to create models and prototypes as part of its research.

In *Eine Beschreibung einer Reflexion, oder aber eine angenehme Übung zu deren Eigenschaften* (A description of a reflection or a pleasant exercise on its qualities, 1995), a spotlight shines onto a circular mirror that directs the light onto a second, rotating mirror with an undulating surface. This mirror completes a full revolution every thirty seconds, reflecting, as it revolves, an irregular patch of light onto the reverse side of a circular projection screen.

In *Your uncertain shadow (colour)* (2010), five colored spotlights, positioned side-by-side on the floor, project light on a white wall, where the colors blend to produce white light. When visitors walk into the space before the spotlights, their shadows appear on the wall as clusters of colorful silhouettes that amplify every movement and reveal the apparently white light's component colors.

### Gallery 206

This gallery brings together many of Eliasson's earliest works and presents interests that continue to motivate his art today. *Window projection* (1990) and *Wannabe* (1991) were made while Eliasson was still at art school. They use different kinds of light to alter the experience of space and architecture. As with many of Eliasson's works of this time, the mechanism is very simple and never concealed from view.

Eliasson has long been interested in nature and the weather. From the start, he connected his experiences of the Icelandic landscape to the practice of making sculptures and installations. Some works, like *Wavemachines* (1995), replicate natural phenomena. In *Moss wall* (1994), created from Scandinavian

reindeer lichen, Eliasson adds an unexpected material from outdoors to the controlled indoor space of the museum. The aroma and texture of the work affect the senses too.

### Gallery 209

Eliasson has been working with mirrors and reflections since the mid-1990s. In this room, *Your spiral view* (2002), *Your planetary window* (2019), and a series of hanging works—*Cold wind sphere* (2012), *Stardust particle* (2014) and *In real life* (2019)—are brought together.

For the artist, these artworks offer more than just a playful visual experience. In *Your spiral view* and *Your planetary window*, for example, multiple reflections reconfigure what you see. You are offered different perspectives at once and understand your position in new ways. You might let go of the sense of being in command of space, and instead enjoy a kind of uncertainty.

Each work is structured by a complex yet regular geometric principle. The artist is particularly interested in spirals, as they create a sense of energy within the object and outside it through the shadow and light play on the surrounding walls.

In *Your imaginary future* (2020), a semicircular arc mounted to a mirror on the ceiling visually combines with its reflection to create the illusion of a giant ring that traverses the mirror's surface, uniting the actual space of the gallery with the virtual space that appears in the mirror.

### Gallery 207

In this gallery visitors enter into *Your atmospheric colour atlas* (2009), which comprises condensed banks of artificially produced fog, infused with the additive primary colors—red, green and blue—emitted from hundreds of fluorescent lights that are installed in the ceiling as a color grid. Walking through the dense, illuminated atmosphere, visitors navigate the space by using this intuitive color atlas.

### Gallery 203

In *Room for one colour* (1997), lamps mounted to the ceiling of a white room emit a single wavelength of yellow light, reducing viewers' color perception to yellow, black and shades of gray. In reaction to the yellow environment, viewers momentarily perceive a bluish afterimage on leaving the space.

### Gallery 202

Eliasson often uses glacial ice in his work. Sometimes, the ice is intended as a call for action to stall climate change. Warmer temperatures have caused the Greenland ice sheet to lose around 200–300 billion tonnes of glacial ice each year, a rate that is expected to increase dramatically. In *The presence of absence pavilion* (2019), a bronze cast makes visible the empty space left by a block of glacial ice that melted away.

In *Glacial currents* (2018), chunks of glacial ice were placed on top of washes of pigment, creating swells and fades of color as they melted onto the paper beneath. *Glacial spherical flare* (2019) is constructed with glass made from small rock particles that result from glacial erosion.

Over the years Eliasson has created photographic series that document the country of Iceland and its natural phenomena. He has described the country as a place he needs to engage with physically—by climbing, walking, swimming or even water rafting, as in *The river-raft series* (2000).

Eliasson's time in Iceland also attuned him to atmospheric conditions. This led to his interest in how artists have captured light throughout history. In *Colour experiment no. 80* and *Colour experiment no. 81* (2019), Eliasson analysed the color palettes of two paintings by German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) that depict the vastness of nature: *Der Mönch am Meer* (*The Monk by the Sea*) (1808–10), and *Der einsame Baum* (*The Lonely Tree*) (1822). Each painting was abstracted into all the colors it contains. These were then distributed proportionately around each canvas to form an alternative color wheel.

Dividing this room in two is *Suney* (1995), an early example of Eliasson's interest in color, architecture and perception.

*The seeing space* (2015), a large glass sphere set into one wall of the gallery, serves as an optical device that offers visitors distorted, inverted views of the activity in the room on the other side, where *Beauty* (1993) is located in a darkened space. In this work, nozzles arranged in a row spray a curtain of fine mist from the ceiling into the bright beam of a spotlight. From certain perspectives, a rainbow can be seen in the falling water; it shifts in intensity or disappears as the viewer approaches it or moves away.

### Gallery 204

In *Big Bang Fountain* (2014) a strobe light illuminates a pulsing fountain of water, causing the bursts of water to appear to freeze into an ever-changing sequence of unique and unpredictable sculptural forms, each of which lasts for only an instant.

### Gallery 208

In his childhood Eliasson traveled regularly to Iceland, forging a strong connection to his parents' home country and its landscape. In 1999, he photographed several dozen glaciers there for an artwork called *The glacier series*. Twenty years later, he returned to photograph the same glaciers again. *The glacier melt series 1999/2019* (2019) brings together thirty pairs of images from 1999 and 2019 to reveal the dramatic impact that global warming is having on our world.

Attached to a cord and suspended from the ceiling in this Gallery, an electric fan swings erratically and irregularly through space. The readymade kinetic sculpture *Ventilator* (1997) is propelled by the air it displaces.

Finally, visitors find a long sofa composed of modular segments, upholstered in a unique fabric of knitted wool. Designed by Eliasson in collaboration with the Danish textile firm Kvadrat, the sofa suggests the rippling sand left behind by the receding tide.

### The Expanded Studio

Eliasson's practice extends beyond making artworks, exhibitions, and public sculptures to projects that reflect his long-standing interests in the environment and in community. He has worked with his studio and with outside collaborators on architectural projects, books, educational programs, and dance projects, to name a few. In 2014 he founded an architectural practice, called Studio Other Spaces, with his long-time collaborator Sebastian Behmann. Over the years, Eliasson has initiated projects that directly address issues the world faces today—for example, renewable energy (Little Sun), climate change (Ice Watch) and migration (*Green light – An artistic workshop*). On the screens in this space, films show some of these projects in action and give impressions of his architectural projects and the daily life in his studio and in the studio's kitchen.

The Expanded Studio evokes the broader interests and activities that Eliasson's studio in Berlin pursues. The large pin-board wall in this space, whose materials are arranged around keywords in alphabetical order, is based on the walls in his Berlin studio where teams of researchers and craftspeople, as well as Eliasson himself, share questions, articles, images and research.

### PUBLIC PROGRAM

#### Olafur Eliasson: artist talk (February 12)

In the run-up to the opening of his show, Olafur Eliasson will talk about his art and creative process, as well as the numerous multidisciplinary projects that he develops on an international scale. The climate, public space, architecture, and migration are some of the concerns that the artist will share with the audience.

#### Shared Reflections

Unique tours guided by professionals from the Museum offer different viewpoints about the works in the exhibition.

- Curatorial Vision: with Lucía Agirre, Museum curator and curator of the exhibition, who will lead a tour of the main works in the show (February 19)
- Key Concepts: with Marta Arzak, Associate Director of Education and Interpretation, who will enter a dialogue with attendants about the general and didactic keys of said works (April 1).

\*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

#### ROUND TABLE Art in Real Life: Exploring WE (May 14)

"We-ness" describes a sense of togetherness that is not tied to any credo or specific agenda, which has progressive potential precisely because its function is not prescribed. This idea is prominent throughout the exhibition's research map – appearing implicitly in fields such as climate, ecology, trust, and compassion – and is closely connected to our individual and collective lived experience.

Participants: Lucía Agirre, exhibition co-curator and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao curator; Ezequiel di Paolo, Professor of Research at Ikerbasque-Basque Foundation for Science and Professor at the Logic and

Philosophy of Science Department at the University of the Basque Country; among others. Moderated by Carlos Urroz, Director of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Foundation.

***Sharing Perspectives*** (May 16-17)

What does it mean to move at the speed of your attention or notice your noticing? In *Sharing Perspectives* – created by dancer and researcher Dorte Bjerre Jensen with anthropologist Joe Dumit, professor of Science and Technology Studies and Anthropology at UC Davis – participants visit the exhibition and select three perspectives to share in silence with another participant. Interviews are conducted at the end of the experiment.

*Sharing Perspectives* is part of the Experimenting, Experiencing, Reflecting (EER) project, a science–art collaboration between Olafur Eliasson and scientist Andreas Roepstorff, director and professor of Cognition, Communication and Culture in the Department of Clinical Medicine and School of Culture and Society at Aarhus University

For more information about the public program accompanying the exhibition see:

<https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/activities>

## LITTLE SUN

Little Sun is a social business that produces solar lamps and chargers designed by Olafur Eliasson for use in off-grid communities. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is partnering with Little Sun and the Regional Government of Bizkaia through the “Lights for Senegal” project. The lamps and chargers will be on sale in the Museum Shop.

## CATALOGUE

Published to accompany the exhibition, the catalogue is conceived as a ‘field guide’ to Eliasson’s practice and features an essay by curator Mark Godfrey, as well as eighteen conversations between the artist and a remarkably varied range of people working both inside and outside the arts—from the fields of economics, anthropology, sustainability, migration, political science, biology, architecture and urbanism, education, dance, music and food—providing insight into the way Eliasson and his studio engage with the world today.

**Cover image:**

*Your uncertain shadow (colour)*, 2010

HMI lamps (green, orange, blue, magenta), glass, aluminium, transformers

Dimension variable

Photo: María del Pilar García Ayensa / Studio Olafur Eliasson

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, Vienna

© 2010 Olafur Eliasson



**For more information:**

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All the information on the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is available at [www.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://www.guggenheim-bilbao.es) (Press Room).

Press images  
*Olafur Eliasson. In real life*  
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

### Online press image service

In the press area of the Museum's website ([prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es](http://prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.es)), you may register to download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you do not yet have an account, you can register and download the material you need. If you are already a user, enter your username and password and you can access images directly.

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### Olafur Eliasson

*Beauty*, 1993

Spotlight, water, nozzles, wood, hose, pump

Dimensions variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

© 1993 Olafur Eliasson



**Olafur Eliasson**

*Moss wall, 1994*

Reindeer moss, wood, wire

Dimensions variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

© 1994 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

*Room for one colour, 1997*

Monofrequency lamps

Dimensions variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

© 1997 Olafur Eliasson

**Olaur Eliasson in collaboration with Einar Thorsteinn**

*Model room, 2003*

Mixed media models, maquettes, prototypes

Dimension variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Purchase 2015 funded by The Anna-Stina Malmberg and Gunnar Höglund Foundation

© 2003 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

*Your atmospheric colour atlas, 2009*

Fluorescent lights, color filter foil (red, green, blue), aluminum, steel, ballasts, haze machine

Dimension variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark

© 2009 Olafur Eliasson



**Olafur Eliasson**

*Your uncertain shadow (colour)*, 2010

HMI lamps (green, orange, blue, magenta), glass, aluminium, transformers

Dimension variable

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection, Vienna

© 2010 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

*Big Bang Fountain*, 2014

Water, strobe light, pump, nozzle, stainless steel, wood, foam, plastic, control unit, dye

165 x 160 x 160 cm

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

© 2014 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

*The glacier melt series 1999/2019*, 2019

30 C-prints, each 31 x 91 x 2.4 cm

Installation view and detail: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

Angeles

© 2019 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

*The presence of absence pavilion*, 2019

Bronze

200 x 100 x 100 cm

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

© 2019 Olafur Eliasson



**Olafur Eliasson***In real life*, 2019

Aluminum, color-effect filter glass (green, yellow, orange, red, pink, cyan), bulb, LED light

Diameter 208 cm

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

© 2019 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson***Waterfall*, 2019

Scaffolding, water, wood, plastic sheet, aluminium, pump, hose

Height 11 metres; diameter 12 metres

Installation view: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2020

Photo: Erika Ede

Courtesy of the artist; neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York / Los Angeles

© 2019 Olafur Eliasson

**Olafur Eliasson**

Photo: Runa Maya Mørk Huber / Studio Olafur Eliasson

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