

## A NEW NARRATIVE FOR EUROPE INTERVIEW WITH ÓLAFUR ELÍASSON

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This interview is part of a series of interviews conducted by Carlos Ruiz Carmona in 2014, in different European cities including Brussels, Copenhagen, Barcelona, Lisbon, Prague, Hague and Amsterdam, to a selected group of European public personalities such as Peter Matjasic, Luis Tabeira, Kathrin Deventer, Paul Dujardin, Ólafur Elíasson, Tomas Sedlacek and Sneska Quaedvlieg. This interview was produced in the framework of the project promoted by the Representation of the European Commission in Portugal to members of the Cultural Committee of the project *A New Narrative for Europe*, authors of the statement *The Body and Mind of Europe*.

The interview presents an intimate reflection on issues such as the identity, the objectives, the socioeconomic problems, the future and the responsibilities of Europe as an international community.

This text features the interview conducted by Carlos Ruiz Carmona to Ólafur Elíasson in Copenhagen. The main focus of this interview lies in discussing the concept of identity from a European and cultural perspective.

### About Ólafur Elíasson



Fig. 1 Carlos Ruiz Carmona, *A New Narrative for Europe* (2014)

Ólafur Elíasson is a renowned Danish-Icelandic artist known for his sculptures and large-scale installations. In his work he mostly employs elemental materials such as light, water and air temperature to enhance the viewer's experience.

Ólafur Elíasson's art is driven by his interests in perception, movement, embodied experience and feelings of self. He strives to make the concerns of art relevant to society at large. Art, for him, is a crucial means for turning thinking into doing in the world. Elíasson's works span sculpture, painting, photography, film and

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installation. Not limited to the confines of the museum and gallery, his practice engages the broader public sphere through architectural projects, interventions in civic space, arts education, policy-making and issues of sustainability and climate change.

In 1995 he established Studio Ólafur Eliasson in Berlin, a laboratory for spatial research. Ólafur represented Denmark at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 and later that year installed *The Weather Project* in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, London.

Ólafur has engaged in a number of projects in public space, including the intervention *Green River*, carried out in various cities between 1998 and Serpentine Pavilion 2007, London, a temporary pavilion designed with the Norwegian architect Kjetil Thorsen; and *The New York City Waterfalls*, commissioned by Public Art Fund in 2008. He also created the Breakthrough Prize trophy. Ólafur was a professor at the Berlin University of the Arts from 2009 to 2014 and is an adjunct professor at the Addis School of Fine Arts and Design in Addis Ababa since 2014.

### The Interview with Ólafur Eliasson

**Ólafur Eliasson:** I think that the question of how to define identity is increasingly defined as something which is, to a great extent, quantifiable. This means if it's quantifiable it's there and if it's non-quantifiable it's not there and clearly, identity is a very emotional issue.

I guess that as in the word identity, it is about identification. See, I think that once you are having a life, you're working with something, you have a hobby, you have your family, somehow you start identifying: "I like this, I don't like this; this is something that I can talk about, something I am good at, I have success in this or this is something I'm less interested in.

I think it's very interesting to see that identity is really what can you identify with and once you feel that you can identify with something it doesn't really matter whether this is geographically, you know, a part of a certain country. I feel that I have as much in



Fig. 2 Carlos Ruiz Carmona, *A New Narrative for Europe* (2014)

common with people in France, inside of the EU and in other countries outside of EU as long as it is the same interest we have.

Sometimes we see something, and you say (*see*): “oh I emotionally resonate with this, I know this feeling, I just haven’t verbalized it yet. I haven’t found a language to explain it, I didn’t even know that I had this feeling, but I look at it, it inspires me, it’s exciting.” This is identification.

So, it is something that puts form on an emotional state that you have inside of yourself and this could be positive, and it could also be negative and could also be a trauma. And suddenly it is verbalized, or it’s formalized, it’s given a language and suddenly you can express it. This is the process of identification for me.

In my case I’ve now had my own studio in Berlin for twenty years. I moved not long after the wall came down. It was an amazing time and I became a part of Berlin. Berlin became a part of me. I grew up in Denmark, not really far away from Germany but clearly as a child you’re very influenced by the society, the values in which you grow up. But the truth is my parents came from Iceland. They were studying in Denmark. They were very young, and I went back to Iceland a lot and I also belong to Iceland. I have very strong feelings about Iceland, and this means that my definition of identity is really based on how I feel and where I feel connected to or I feel that I belong to.

I think it’s clear that Europe has a kind of an identity crisis.

I wouldn’t say that Europe really is in crisis.

I think that there is a very robust tradition of trust and trade, I call it. There’s a culture for, you know, exchange and there is a very robust infrastructure around this.

The sad thing is that it’s so boring... People are not going to identify with each other based on a trade contract or a trade deal.

...so, there is this kind of... you know, the defence of trade and the optimization of things and people can maybe fail sometimes to understand how much, you know, soft success is based on a success with the business sector, right?



Fig. 2 Carlos Ruiz Carmona, *A New Narrative for Europe* (2014)

I think people may underestimate that if the business, the finance or sort of the all money system is mismanaged, it would have consequences for humanistic areas as well.

But besides that, I think the failure of this sort of thing that maybe is being mismanaged, in the interest of trying not to kind of monopolize or colonize culture, the emotional narrative or the identification mechanism was left out of the European protocol. Education... the general knowledge machinery was left in the hands of the locals.

I wouldn't say it's gone terribly wrong; it just means that there is no agenda, there's no protocol, there's no way of creating a stronger interdependence within Europe which has this greater sense of emotional things. And of course, the big question is whether they should be like that, you know, because we obviously don't want a "top down" definition of how to organize the civic infrastructure and civic trust and all that, we want the civic trust to be "bottom-up", clearly. But we also have to see that sometimes the combination of "top down" and civic trust "bottom up" allows for basic human rights issues.

The freedom to vote, land ownership issues, women and children rights, so on and so forth...

Generally speaking, Europe is, of course, very progressed that people like myself ... I take freedom of speech for granted which is very dangerous, right? I feel so comfortable that I just think: "well, of course freedom of speech is natural, it's non-negotiable, it's always there. But the truth is Europe is very small and you don't have to travel very far until you are in a situation where freedom of speech, religion, sexuality and gender and so on is much more complex and problematic.

I had to travel so I could appreciate what was inside of Europe.



Fig. 3 Carlos Ruiz Carmona, *A New Narrative for Europe* (2014)

It's very interesting that I had to leave, I had to go to countries where it is not possible to say what you want in order to say: "Well, what I'm capable of doing would be difficult for me to do here". And this is something that cannot just be in a "bottom up" or "top down", it is really a combination of how to create a civic infrastructure that is trust driven.

So, in a way, I see that we have the old European countries where people kind of take the basic of human rights issues for granted that they forget to nurture them and then you have people who've joined recently, the eastern part of Europe which are so exciting and energetic countries, and there you don't have the same civic trust, you don't have the same evolution of human rights yet.

They have come very far compared to other places in the world, still much further. And now there's a slightly lack of dialogue because the people who take it for granted

they go “It goes without saying, we don’t have to talk about it”, and the people, you know, who are only getting used to it they have really created a way of operationalizing human rights. So, you still have very conflicted statements about homosexuality, for instance, and things that you wouldn’t expect... “What? How? This is so barbaric; how can this happen?” And you suddenly took for granted that this country would have gone beyond that for a long time ago and you realize that it’s not going to be a European “top down” thing. It has to come from the civic trust.



Fig. 2 Carlos Ruiz Carmona, *A New Narrative for Europe* (2014)

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