

## GPC Members Meeting 2018: Building Trust for Philanthropic Impact



Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York, NY

Wednesday, May 9, 2018

9:00 am – 4:30 pm

### Art for Social Impact

Olafur Eliasson, Artist and Founder, Little Sun

Interviewed by John Heller, Former Managing Director, Synergos Consulting Services, CEO, Little Sun

UNKNOWN: So, this last session, we're very pleased to look at the topic of Art for Social Justice. I'm going to hand this over to my colleague, John Heller, who is the Managing Director of our Consulting Services Department to get us going.

HELLER: Maybe we'll just give everybody another minute just to come on in and get settled. Folks from the hallway, we're going to lock you all in. And just we're going to close the backdoor there and get settled. So, just a few more people coming in, we'll give them a second to get settled, then we'll get under sail.

Come on, there are some seats up here. Thank you.

OK. Thanks, everybody for being here. My name is John Heller and I'm delighted to guide our session today with my friend, Olafur Eliasson. We'll be exploring the compelling and rapidly evolving intersection between art and social and environmental impact through a dialogue with one of the world's most imaginative people working in the space.

And we're especially grateful to Olafur for being with us today because he's really, literally, just gotten off a plane from Ethiopia, just arriving now to be with us. So, thank you for coming all this way.

ELIASSON: Thank you, John.

HELLER: Thank you.

ELIASSON: Thanks.

(APPLAUSE)

HELLER: So, just a few words of introduction so you can place Olafur, if you haven't already heard of him. Olafur is an acclaimed artist. He works in sculpture, painting, photography, film, and installations. His art is driven by interest in perception, movement, embodied experience and feelings of self.

Many of Olafur's works are quite extraordinary because they really give the public an experience of beyond the museum, beyond the gallery. For those of you who live in New York, you might have encountered New York City Waterfalls installed on the Brooklyn and Manhattan shorelines in 2007.

Also, there was a survey around the same time at MoMA you were just sharing with me. And another of Olafur's works is called Ice Watch which brought melting icebergs from Greenland to Copenhagen in 2014, and to Parris for the COP 21 Climate Conference the following year.

In 2012, Olafur and inventor Frederick Ottesen founded Little Sun which provides clean, affordable light to communities without access to electricity in Africa. And Little Sun encourages sustainable development through the sale of little sun lamps, and also raises global awareness about the need for affordable access to clean energy.

I met Olafur and the team of Little Sun about six months ago with my colleague, Elliott (ph). Are you here somewhere, Elliot (ph)? Synergos Consulting Services was working with the Little Sun team during consulting assignment. I personally was so moved by what they were doing and felt Little Sun so important in the global landscape, that I'm actually leaving Synergos to join Little Sun.

And so, for me, this is a very beautiful moment of transition from one part of my life to another. So, thank you all for sharing that with me.

What we wanted to do, actually, is something a little unusual but Synergos is a little weird, as you might remember, is to start off in the darkness. And just to bring to our consciousness and to our spirit and souls all the people, the billion plus people in the world who live without access to electricity.

So, we're going to ask our colleagues in the A-V department to just turn the lights off and we're going to seat quietly just for a moment. And then the lights are going to go off. There we go. So, we'll just take a moment just to be here, present in the darkness.

Let's hear from Olafur. Tell us, how do you art is really helping to bring about a world that's healthier and more sustainable?

ELIASSON: Well, when I work with art, I always both work within the institutions, but I work a lot in public space and on the street and with communities. And one of the things that I was particularly driven by was the kind of trust that I think that culture contributes to civic society as such.

So, I've always thought culture and art as a way of reflecting our emotional need in civic society which would create a space where people would, you know, know feel comfortable with sharing ideas and thoughts and actions that they would not -- not necessarily be able to share in their workplace at home, maybe or at school.

And so, the cultural sector as a space, as a civic space, I think, has a lot to offer. Obviously, there's a professional part inside of institutions such as great museums but culture, really, as a lot more to offer.

I grew up in Denmark and in Scandinavia, being Icelandic, so I experienced a very well-functioning institutional and sort of a welfare model where there was a lot of social cohesion. And through my art career, I've been able to travel around the world and I experienced a lot of other societies in which the cultural sector really could have a huge impact.

Some 15 years ago, I started traveling a little bit in the East Africa which led to me and my wife adopting two children from Ethiopia and that started a relationship, a sort of a overlap in destiny with Ethiopia where we got to know the country a little more intimate and this is where, then for the first time, experienced having to spend the evening with friends in darkness, just like we are now.

And I thought to myself, being primarily working with light, I should say, maybe working with an experience of light and what does light do to us and so on, I was really stunned by the fact that the darkness, you know, to a large extent was pretty, you know, in 95 percent of the country that was if they would not necessarily burn fossil fuel, so biomass and so on, that darkness was such a thing.

See, I -- see now, I spent my summers in Iceland as a child with my grandparents. And as you might know in the northern hemisphere such as Iceland, the sun sets at this very low angle which means that there's a twilight zone, there's the blue light, the twilight which is maybe four, five hours long. I mean, all together, the sun set and the sun rises almost half of the -- half of the 24 hours cycle.

So, I really experienced this very subtle change and the kind of amazing qualities of light in that and that taught me a lot. And I was stunned in Africa by the fact that the sun, obviously, sets close to the crater perpendicular to the horizon.

And it just means that you go from bright day, then you have, like, 20 minutes of kind of twilight and then it's pitch black. And, obviously, this darkness is also amazing and it just defines another space which -- where you have to navigate and organize yourself because it is a consistent part of your life. It's not like the day slowly ends, it's just like suddenly the day is over. Just like now when we turned the light off.

So, I thought, my God, I must be able to do something with light in this and my good friend and inventor, Frederick Ottesen, you mentioned, he's a solar engineering and that was about five or six years ago just when the subsidization of solar panels in the whole general quality and price range of batteries, LEDs, and solar panels came to meet the prices of fossil fuels which since then has gone up or down a bit and so on.

But at the time, we thought we were definitely going to make a huge impact. And I said, why don't we give it the shape of a work of art as I do think that there has to be a sort of emotional aspect to it. And I thought, maybe we try as our eyes are actually getting used to the dark, it's interesting that it takes about 45 seconds for us to -- as you -- as we can see, we can kind of see very well now. We could have done the conference in this, not very comfortable, though, but I'm just saying this is -- it's actually not so dark after all.

But let's try to turn on the lanterns. Should we...

HELLER: Yes. So, there's one on each table. There's two different models of them but go ahead. See what we can -- there's a little white button on the -- this ones that turn them on.

ELIASSON: It's on the front...

HELLER: They're both on the front. Here we go. One by one. Table by table. How nice.

(CROWD SPEAKING)

ELIASSON: Thank you.

HELLER: Olafur, help us understand what -- what this really means in the life of somebody who's living without power in Africa. So, what does it really produce for that person?

ELIASSON: So, I think that there's a few levels in this. Obviously, the first one is that it very frankly gives you light to do what you need to do, right? That's the simple story.

But I also think it teaches us and it teaches the people who use this, something about the fact that energy is something you can, in fact, harvest. We can collect the energy during the day and that's what it takes, about five hours, to this -- for this to be fully charged. Then you have one evening of light.

And the notion that you -- of the cyclical idea that you kind of, in the day, you can sort of go out and get the energy and this notion of energy as something that is a sense of self-empowerment. You sort of how -- you become your own power station. So, on a slightly deeper level, there was this notion and this idea that it's not just light it's also this idea, well, I am actually a source of energy myself.

So, like a work of art, there was a kind of emotional or, you could say, a non-quantifiable success criteria and this, this idea of enabling people to say, well, I'm going to create my own source of energy.

Obviously, you collect your own firewood, you go and buy petroleum at the gas station as well. But in this sense, it is, I think the notion here is that you kind of become a power station or you own your own little handheld power station.

HELLER: And how do you use this as an object to engage people in dialogue in places where there is electricity? I know you do a lot of work around that as well, too.

ELIASSON: Well, so, we obviously work in a so called off-grid areas out of -- outside of the electrical grid. But the reason why this is so important to me is that I tried to design a lantern which was attractive to everybody in

the world, meaning in the global south and global north, on and off grid. The thing is, here that the caring for the planet is, obviously, something we all care.

And it was important to see if we can come up with a narrative or with a design that was not just for, you know, one part of the world-being the donning -- the donators and the other one being the receiver. Maybe, instead of all of us are together, the producers of the well-being of the planet. And so, the idea is that we use this, Little Sun and myself, use this as a sort of a campaigning tool and we'd go around and we talk at events.

And we try to bring it out in educational systems in this so-called off/on-grid areas too, so that children like my children who live in Denmark with me, they actually and go out and harvest their energy because they need to have light at night when they read their bedtime stories, for instance, right? And the fact is that, you know, my daughter asked me so -- a while ago and she asked me.

So, now I've been reading their bedtime stories with your dad lamp (ph) and they're very well aware that I kind of made her do it but she said, so where did all the CO2 now go that we saved? Where is it? You know, where -- does it sit in a room somewhere?

HELLER: Yes, yes...

ELIASSON: So, the fact that my daughter, when she was eight, would ask me, you know, a complex question of where does the CO2 that did not go to the atmosphere go. So, for her, this -- this is an opportunity to sort of start a relationship with something which is so abstract such as the climate.

HELLER: Well, I would say that also for my daughter who's eight years old, it's kind of turned her into a climate activist because now we have a basis to have a conversation, well, what's this? Do you plug it in? How does it work? And it's also exciting to my 85-year-old mother who thinks it's really pretty and interesting.

And I was just showing this to the AV gentleman who was helping us and just to turn it on, it gave a little smile. So, like, there's something about the object, but there's something about the emotional charge of the object that invites people to have a conversation that's something deeper which is what you're saying.

ELIASSON: And I guess, also, the point is here that the whole thing about smiling, it's so incredibly important that it -- that it -- that it becomes about acknowledging that noticing that you need to proactively choose, for instance, solar energy or sustainable energy for that to happen. How do you say that a choice drive a behavioral change? That needs an emotional component.

We, obviously, in -- when working off grid, we work with very different -- both private sector, philanthropic sector of the government or in sort of more conventional local NGOs. One of them is IOM, International Office of Migrant (ph), who did a report for us. It was a report assessment of impact on the Little Sun.

And just to kind of go to the results trait, so typically, a family, two parents, two kids, first they -- after eating, the boy would do the homework because the boy does the homework first. But the girls also goes to school by now, that has become a little normal. This is in the -- a far region in northern Ethiopia.

They -- when the boy is done, then the girl does her homework. Typically, they would use kerosene and the boy would spent most of the kerosene and the girl would have what is left. The reason why the girl doesn't do it, as we know, is because she first does the housework and helps with the cleaning and so on and so forth.

This is all common knowledge. But what happened with the Little Sun is that they girl spent a lot more time, so the boy had 20 percent more homework impact and the girl had 80 percent more housework impact, leading to the fact that she would have a much larger impact. So, and the result, it was very interesting also by the fact that they did not have to go and collect firewood, which is in the afternoon, the girl will do that after school and so on and so forth.

So, all these micro impacts, see, now, the thing is that saved that family about \$1 a week. You can say that's \$50 a year which is still relatively little even for a very bottom of the pyramid type of household. But if there is now a hundred thousand of them, then obviously, it's 100,000 times \$50 a year.

That's 50 times a hundred, it's \$5 million. \$5 million worth of kerosene not going to that region is a significant amount. It's not -- obviously, kerosene being used for many other things. It's not all the kerosene. I'm just saying this potential of scaling even these small thins is enormous.

So, when we work at Little Sun, we both drive the awareness. We work with girl empowerment and education as a holistic system but we also try to bring about the awareness of the economical impact and this is how we can motivate the local, you know, the local government because if that's \$50 or \$5 million does not go to kerosene, it goes into the local economy. And this where -- where we are -- where we're trying to see it as a holistic thing. It's both about economical sustainability, it's about awareness, about climate consciousness for the whole family, and it's about the education and the girl, in particular.

HELLER: There's a lot there. I wonder -- 5 minutes. My goodness. Can we take -- take a question or two from the audience, just quickly, while we have a little bit of time for Olafur?

QUESTION: I was wondering what is the price of my Little Sun and who is paying for it? Is it the governments or is it organizations?

ELIASSON: So, the Little Sun is both are in Germany registered so called GmbH. It's a social business and it's also a foundation. Through the foundation, we are capable of working within U.N. and other organization. And through the business, we try to collaborate with local entrepreneurs such as small private sector entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa.

We have diversified ways of sort of impact and we really look very hard. We're working both with aqua associations, farmers market associations, and women empowerment associations and so on, simply trying to kind of develop stronger last mile success.

What seems to be the driver, though, is the fact that people recognize it. So, gradually, see success in terms of people saying, I saw this little yellow or this diamond. I saw it somewhere. This is how -- so, interestingly, we are -- impacting in quantifiables. We have delivered half a million lamps in Sub-Saharan Africa in various projects.

We are still looking scaling opportunities. But what is also a success is the kind of what I call the non-quantifiables, the fact that people recognize it and say my uncle's son has this and this is really interesting. He uses it all the time. Simply because it's very recognizable and we drive or should I say a strong campaign of an awareness around it.

So, the model is that we sell it. For instance, here in New York, at the MoMA and many museum, these are the people that I know from the art world should buy -- typically buy \$25, \$30 for a Little Sun. So, the bulk of that money goes then to subsidize the delivery to lamps in places with less affluent infrastructure.

But we do try to sustain this notion that you -- you pay for it also once -- we try to work as a private sector initiative because we do believe that the economical instability that one could support by delivering but often with a loss of it has deficit. We try to sort of a little loan or we work with loan associations, so we very rarely, just to be honest, actually have a clean private sector activity on the ground in Africa.

Occasionally, of course, we work with associate added yesterday on is actually have a team private-sector activity on the location and of course we work with, as I've said, REM with UNICEF, with Save the Children, with Oxfam, and so on. And very often, in refugee environments where there's no economical infrastructure or very little, in these cases, the lamps are donated and not, you know, sold.

But I was just in Addis Ababa yesterday, again talking with people which are a mix between government and NGO and even the government is very proud, trying to support economical infrastructure around it, not necessarily private sector as the government is not a very private-sector friendly, to say the least.

But still, they were very much like to see economical, sort of, say, a progressive economical ideas developed from it. So, we were talking about a pay-as-you-go system that the government would then eventually also invest in. We'll see whether that happens.

HELLER: So, if we can tuck in a quick question from Elliott (ph), I saw your hand up, but then a last one from you on the row back up.

QUESTION: So, yes, I just got a quick question. Are you noticing any market entrants that are entering the space? I've started to see these solar types when I was coming in and, you know, with the advent of China and

Chinese products in South Africa, are you trying to see sort of a market-based (ph) mechanism that's sort of addressing problem? And I guess the other question I would have is just where do you go from here?

ELIASSON: Yes, I mean, we are five -- six years old now. A lot have changed in these six years. There's about five or six players out there. Some of which are gradually growing a lot. But all of which -- all of us had, in fact, in common that we're not making any profit. Sadly yet, but say, we are first movers and the awareness for -- like, five years ago, you really literally had to explain people that they can trust that this little black square on the back does collect solar energy. Now, everyone just says this is a solar panel. There' a huge change in that sense.

I also think the whole way of, you know, working, people are starting to acknowledge there's a lot of other and more informal economical models to work at the bottom -- to work at the bottom of the pyramid. We are -- we are working a lot with pay-as-you-go partners and we have developed a pay-as-you-go model ourselves.

But maybe more support -- maybe most importantly is the gradual change in understanding, well, what do people want at the bottom -- bottom of the pyramid? This, I think, is maybe the biggest change because I think what everybody is gradually seeing, well, everybody wants the same. They want a good life. They want to have a beautiful home. They want to show their friends they have nice things at home.

And this is the point that the Little Sun has been working on a lot to have the same narrative, the same language, the same goals, for everyone in the world. Namely, you know, a good family (ph), good education, freedom of speech, and so on and so forth. And in that sense, a lot of things are happening where we can see the NGOs, for instance, working on the ground. Their language has become much less patronizing. The idea that whether you want to try to convince somebody to buy needs to be something you would want to have in your own house as well. This, I think, is -- you know, people are starting to, for instance, respect the informal market and Sub-Saharan Africa as a real market.

HELLER: So, like I said, one last question for Olafur and then we have to wrap up, unfortunately. I know, Oliver (ph), you wanted to ask something.

QUESTION: (OFFMIKE) (Inaudible). Just to really (inaudible) people like you who are really, you know, coming with this kind of invention for, particularly, which benefits, you know, our poor community, our people on the, you know, rural areas. And saying that, I think there are, you know, this kind of invention coming into rural areas and I'm happy that even there are these solar things which our farmers are using to charge their mobile phones. As you know, these mobile phones are now becoming popular even in the rural areas.

So, maybe I would be the happiest person when -- to see, you know, our scientists is also developing, you know, a stove from solar -- solar energy, like which can be used by the rural community so that we can save our forest or our, you know, our trees.



ELIASSON: Exactly. Yes. It's a good point. There's a whole range of products such as stove and cooler, refrigerators. And they -- so, currently, the energy density for cooking is of such mass that they solar panel required to boil two liters of water for two hours is a huge solar panel.

So, in terms of physics, there's still a little bit of way to go. But efficient cookers are changing a lot. And so, there's a lot of things happening in this, too, as this is one of the primary polluters. I would love to see the Little Sun diversifying it's, you know, we have a mobile phone charger, we have a larger lamp, we have a range -- I would love to develop into also. I think the next thing would be a cooler and a stove, cold and hot, as this is.

I also think that probably, the other next thing would be to actually produce it locally, to create jobs and to have a kind of -- because by all means, this is a plastic injection mold. It's a recyclable plastic. We're going to, hopefully, in a few years, have a fully recycle plastic, meet the price range where you are competing with it, fossil fuels. This is defined by what is the alternative to solar and that is fossil fuel.

So, the reason why we need to make it so affordable is simply to make people go for this so that profitability of this versus, you know, the fossil fuel even though this is quite technical is what -- is what kind of defines the design.

HELLER: So we are, unfortunately, out of time. There's a lot more to talk about. I hope you'll be around for a little while so you can meet some of the members.

Please join me in thanking Olafur for being with us today.

(APPLAUSE)

ELIASSON: Thank you. Thanks a lot. Thanks a lot.

UNKNOWN: Thank you. Thank you so much for coming by.

As I mentioned earlier today, in the beginning of the meeting -- what? Lights? Lights, please.

This is a really great example of how through Synergos its consulting work, we can support organizations and social businesses like Little Sun. So, if you have any needs like that, please feel free to get in touch. And of course, if you're interested in connecting to Olafur and Little Sun and the work that they're doing, we're happy to make those connections.

Thank you again for coming.