

In 2003, the same year that he unveiled *The Weather Project*, his now legendary giant artificial sun that lit up the Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern, Olafur Eliasson also created a much more intimately dramatic work of art. In a makeshift gallery at the Venice Biennale, he installed a white plastic drum that protruded from a wall with a red button on it that said "PRESS." Anyone who was brave or curious enough to press the button was startled seconds later by an intense flash of light from within the drum. For several minutes afterwards, each time the viewer blinked, the word "UTOPIA" was imprinted on their retina. It was a work of art that literally made you see the world differently, and as such was both an illustration of and a metaphor for the Icelandic-born artist's methodology. Perhaps more than any other artist working today, Eliasson involves the viewer directly in the artworks he creates. "My work is not about me," he once said, "it's about you."

The Weather Project was the most successful single work of contemporary art exhibited in Britain in recent years, attracting an astonishing 2 million viewers to Tate Modern. More interesting still was the way in which the audience interacted with the piece. Many visitors wandered slowly through the Turbine Hall as if determined to take it all in, while others lounged on the floor for hours like sunbathers. Some days the atmosphere turned celebratory as crowds of strangers interacted by arranging their bodies to spell out giant words that were reflected on the mirrored ceiling. When Tim Neuger, Eliasson's gallerist in Berlin, visited Tate Modern, a group of young people had spelt out the words "Fuck Bush" on the ceiling. He rang Eliasson in Berlin and let him listen to the cheers of the crowd echoing through the Turbine Hall.

You could say that Eliasson has reinvented the way in which conceptual art is received by the public, replacing the usual hushed reverence — or sighs of exasperation — with a mood of playful and anarchic mischief. "I do not see my work as any kind of statement or a manifesto," he says. "It's a dialogue. Always."

Right now, that dialogue is continuing apace in New York, and with equally dramatic results, where Eliasson has created a series of giant self-propelling waterfalls on the East River. Situated at four different points between Manhattan and Brooklyn, the *New York City Waterfalls* range in height from 27m to 36m, each pumping up to more than one million liters of water a minute up and over their giant frames. At night, they are illuminated, adding another level of surrealism to an otherwise drab stretch of the river. Eliasson's art attempts to make us see the everyday in a different light. "In a way," says Eliasson, "I like to think that I have given New Yorkers back their river."

And they, in their turn, have responded in kind. On the online photograph site, Flickr, visitors have posted more than 5,000 snapshots of the waterfalls, a mass response

Producing reality

He brought the sun to London's Tate Modern. Now he's conjured waterfalls in New York. Meet Olafur Eliasson, whose epic artworks of sublime beauty are lighting up world cities

BY SEAN O'HAGAN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

that pleases Eliasson much more than the chorus of excited approval that greeted the project's unveiling in the US media. "On Flickr, the photographs have been taken mainly on mobile phones, and often there are people in the photographs with the waterfalls," he says. "It's a highly subjective way of documenting the work. I see the waterfalls as a co-producer of the time and place in which they take place. I suppose, in that way, the work filters into questions about society and democracy."

This may indeed be the case, but it strikes me later, while perusing the images on Flickr, that the *New York City Waterfalls* may also function as a kind of temporary tourist attraction that visitors pose in front of in much the same way that they pose in front of the iconic skyline or the Statue of Liberty further out in the harbor. In this way, Eliasson's artwork may well have slipped, like artworks have a tendency to do, out of the artist's control.

And for Olafur Eliasson, art does seem in a very real way to be about control. He frets a lot about how his work is interpreted to the point where he often tries to undercut the media's tendency to report what he does as mere spectacle. Or, as he puts it, "I have a team that includes lawyers, copyright specialists, press officers, all making sure that the values I think the work represents are navigated into the communication of the project throughout the process. In my practice, I try my best to avoid the experience of my work being formalized, standardized, generalized and rationalized. My work is about the opposite."

For someone who makes epic works of such sublime beauty — in itself quite a feat in an age when notions of the sublime in art sometimes seem as passe as pastels and

watercolors — Eliasson is a doggedly serious, even earnest, young man. Talking to him about his art can be oddly exhausting. His mind, as his ambitious projects suggest, is in constant motion, one thought spiraling into another in ever-evolving circles of conceptual complexity. Like many installation artists, he has a tendency to theorize and his speech is littered with terms like "duality" and "collectivity," not to mention "experiential." He is the contemporary artist-as-boffin as well as architect, designer, philosopher and scientist.

"If one were to look for precedents as to the way Olafur works," says Hans Ulrich Obrist of the Serpentine Gallery in London, where the artist created a pavilion last summer, "it would have to be Buckminster Fuller, the artist-as-inventor. He has that kind of enquiring approach where the art emerges out of collective studio operation that is essentially a laboratory of ideas."

To this end, Eliasson currently employs around 40 people in his Berlin studio, including architects and scientists as well as craftsmen and designers. It's all very Scandinavian, the notion of the unified aesthetic taken to conceptual extremes in the pursuit of art that is so ambitious in both its form and content that it engages the audience almost as much as it has engaged the minds of its creators. Before he installed his giant sun in Tate Modern, Eliasson's team constructed a small-scale version of the Turbine Hall, about 12m long, in his studio so that they could wander through it and observe the effects.

I meet Eliasson in Copenhagen, where he has a big, bright, airy harbor-side office. He lives in the Danish capital with his wife and two adopted



Above: Olafur Eliasson at the Miro Foundation in Barcelona. Below: One of four man-made waterfalls in Eliasson's *New York City Waterfalls* project cascades under the Brooklyn Bridge.

children when he is not working in Berlin, or flying around the world to oversee the various high-concept art projects he seems to be juggling at any given time. (In 1998, he had more than 60 artworks on show across the world.) Both his adopted son and daughter are Ethiopian, and he and his wife, the art historian Marianne Krogh Jensen, run a charity for Ethiopian orphans called 121Ethiopia.org. Recently, he designed a kind of mini art installation in the form of a light projection that will greet visitors to every Louis Vuitton shop on the planet — there are more than 300. All the money earned from the commission went directly to his charity fund.

Currently, Eliasson is involved in an ambitious urban renewal project in Manhattan called the High Line, and earlier this summer he had a big retrospective of his work at MoMA. Alongside the architects Diller Scofidio+Renfro, he will help transform a 2.4km stretch of disused elevated railway track into an elongated shopping mall with a park. Or, as the DS+R Web site puts it, "a post-industrial instrument of leisure reflection." You can see why Olafur gets along with them.

For the past two-and-a-half years, he has also been working on what he calls his "academy." The vast new office-cum-studio space he has purchased in Berlin was formerly a school and, when it is converted, will house up to 20 student-apprentices who, Bauhaus-style, will learn how to be artists by being on-site and contributing to the Eliasson laboratory of ideas.

"Though all this is not related directly to making art, it is exciting and therapeutic," he says, sounding genuinely enthused by the challenge. "When you move studio, you can also optimize the values of the workplace. I can now give more space to the things that have turned out to be important and shed the less interesting things. A studio is not just a workspace but a little psychographic universe of the brain."

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[CD REVIEWS: TAIWAN]



Crowd Lu (盧廣仲)
100 Lives (100種生活)
Team Ear Music

Listen to this album and you'll think there is hope for Mando-pop after all. Not that Tainan-native Crowd Lu (盧廣仲) aspires to be the next Jay Chou (周杰倫) or Wang Lee-hom (王力宏), at least for now. Lu's debut album is chock-full of sunshine pop, beautifully conceived and executed, yet down-to-earth and full of surprises.

Aside from impressive songwriting skills and instrumental talent, the 23-year-old Lu sports a come-from-behind narrative that fuels his fire: while recovering in the hospital from a serious car accident, he resolved to learn the guitar. From there, he won a handful of college contests; his geek-chic charm and vocal skills earned him a following and at one point made him a YouTube star.

With the uplifting *Good Morning, Beautiful Morning*, replete with a bouncy rhythm and bright vocal harmonies, Lu ropes you in and doesn't let up. He sounds like the nice brother helping his kid sister get ready for school when he utters in Taiwanese-accented Mandarin "Hey, get-up-for breakfast — hurry up." Pop hooks then hit you left and right,

making the song's cuteness endearing instead of annoying. The song's deceptively simple chorus, "Dui-a, Dui-a" (對啊, 對啊), looks silly on paper, but is infectious and fun to hear. Lu then throws in a wicked, lyrical guitar solo, and by the tempo change at the bridge, you're almost sad the song is about to end.

The album keeps you engaged with variety: there's pop, funk, rock and even a 20-second thrash metal interlude. And for all the indie attitude, Lu doesn't shy from straightforward ballads. On the album's title track, he cruises comfortably from a husky alto to a falsetto; his voice soars but he makes it seem effortless.

Lu keeps it real by driving most of the songs with guitar, which makes his feel-good pop sensibilities easier to swallow. But there is also a sense of honesty that comes through in his songs, something sorely lacking among Mando-pop artists today.

— DAVID CHEN



Matthew Lien (馬修·連恩)
Adventures in the Hakka Heartland (旅)
Wind Music

Matthew Lien made his name in Taiwan as an "eco-musician," and the island

continues to serve as his main source of artistic inspiration. With *Adventures in the Hakka Heartland*, Lien turns his attention to Hakka folk music in Taiwan.

The album was born out of a program on Hakka TV that Lien co-hosted with singer-songwriter Hsieh Yu-wei (謝宇威). The two spent six months traveling to Hakka communities in the countryside to meet and record singers and musicians who performed traditional music. In between location visits, Lien took the field recordings and returned to his studio to add backing instrumentation to the performances.

The result is a time-lapsed collaboration: you'll hear folk artist performances, mostly vocal, but with editing, backing instrumentation and studio polish from Lien. Many of the songs are medleys that combine performances from one location that "tells the story" of a community. *The Four Mountain Kings* is based on Lien's trip to Chungtung (竹東) in Hsinchu County, a site renowned for its Hakka Mountain Song singing competition. The song features two different generations of singers — a group of four elderly men and a class of elementary school students.

Within each track, the mood often changes as new performers appear. Ambient synthesizers and a Native American flute solemnly introduce a solitary voice in *Among Rows of Tea*, which grows into a chorus of Hakka and Atayal singers from a village in Ilan County. The sound becomes more sentimental with a vocal performance from a Hakka tea farmer.

Overall, the songs connect seamlessly with the feel of a musical or movie soundtrack. Lien's seasoned studio skills clearly come into play here, and the finished product reflects his musical

ethos of clean, pristine production and slick pop arrangements. Lien intends the album to serve as a celebration of Hakka music, but it won't resonate with folk music enthusiasts looking for authenticity. Instead this album will probably appeal to listeners who, like Lien, prefer to connect with a subject through imagination and romance.

— DAVID CHEN



PunkGod (龐古)
Youth (少年)
Toa Kang Records

PunkGod are two musicians from China's Jiangxi Province who were forced to go into exile after declaring their support for Taiwan independence at a Taipei concert in 2004. They received political asylum in Sweden, where they recorded their latest album, *Youth* (少年), recently released through a Taipei-based label.

The band shows its dissident street cred in songs like *Soul of Taiwan* (台灣魂) and the title track, with lyrics like "Youth is dead/It's been killed by the Communist Party." But beyond their political musings, PunkGod has made an album with some interesting musical ideas.

Their sound is full of punk angst

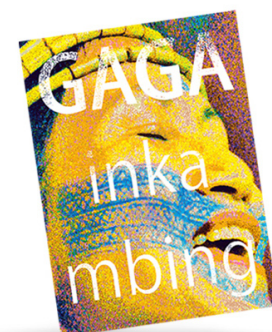
propped by sparse instrumentation, which is used to great effect on songs like *Help the Revolution, Get a Revolution* (革命得革命). The band overdrives the piezo pickups on their acoustic guitars, which hits a distortion as satisfying as any electric guitar amp cranked up to eleven.

The punked-out acoustic guitars sound like angry marching on *I Won't Play Again for a Cow* (不再對牛彈琴), a song with eerie hypnotic rhythms that reminds one of Tom Waits' more recent music. The tune's lyrics are delivered with a gruff growl, and it's hard to tell if they're trying to be profound or silly: "I once played for a cow, but I won't do it anymore/I decided it was a waste of time, I've decided to eat beef and nibble on the bone."

On *Revenge for the People* (為人民報仇), the vocals slide from yells to high-pitched whines to near-uncontrollable howls on the words "bao chou" (報仇), and pause with perfect timing. In between, the singer's guttural utterances sound like Mongolian throat-singing.

PunkGod also dabbles with electronic beats, which ground the furious chorus of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢) and provide a tonic for the desolate *Bury You With the Dead* (陪葬).

— DAVID CHEN



Inka Mbing (雲力思)
Gaga
Trees Music & Art

Gaga is the first full-length release of 54-year-old Atayal (泰雅) singer Inka Mbing (雲力思) and includes traditional Aboriginal songs as well as original works. What all the tracks share is an intensity and commitment to the music as part of a way of life and of deeply felt experience. One gets the feeling that Inka is reaching out to create a musical portrait of a people, one that takes in the children's playground as much as the vast prospects of the mountains which many Atayal call home. The effort is not entirely successful, with traditional tunes like *Quas mtglaw* (Gathering Song) and *Sinramat na rimuy* (Rimuy Tune), with their simple and catchy harmonies well suited to cheerful singalongs, sitting somewhat uncomfortably against the rich musical texture and tragic cadences of Inka's original works like *Linnigisan na ryyax* (Call of the Mountain), which opens the album. In this first song, traditional melodies are enriched by the use of cello, by IO Chen (陳主惠); guitar, by Ken Ohtake; and tarka flute, by Sangpny Kataepan; and is led by Inka's own incomparably evocative voice. As with the best of world music, such tracks transcend their source, generating an appeal that is not directly bound to the community that inspired them. The album comes with detailed liner notes that include the lyrics as sung, with translations into Chinese. It is of momentary interest to discover the meaning of the text, but this can quickly be put aside as you give yourself over to the mood of the music.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW