

VIEL BJERKESET ANDERSEN



# An interview: Viel Bjerkeset Andersen

Hello Viel and welcome to NotRandomArt. To start with, would you like to tell us something about your artistical as well as life background? What inspired you to be in this artistical point in your life when you are now?

Thank you for your interest in my art!

I grew up in an academic arts and crafts family; my father has a PhD in nuclear physics and spent all his life at the University in Oslo, my mother was a textile arts and crafts teacher at the HiO-A in Oslo, so during my childhood I spent lots of time playing at their work. At both places I experienced the dualism between experiments and research, and the rational and logic. I felt free to disturb my parents colleagues to satisfy my curiosity on every topic I at the time was interested in. I loved being in those two institutions, the people were so generous. And the most popular birthday parties were those where my father showed physical experiments from everyday life. At home we had a quite good workshop and dark room for developing black and white photos. I got my own camera at early age, and learned how to make photos the analogue way, to wind up films in complete darkness at the toilet, and I spent lots of time in the dark room. And I guess my handy parents took for granted that as a girl I should handle all tools as easy as my elder brothers did. I was not a very girlish child, and I liked to be by my self, to find out things by my self. I had little projects all the time.

But it was not at all evident that I should be an artist; I was very much into nature, deeply interested in being under water, investigating everything I could manage under sea level. As early teenager my leading star was Jacques-Yves Cousteau, I started early with diving. I wanted to become a marine biologist to be as much as

I could under the sea. But my initial efforts starting at the university made me really unhappy, so I quit. Switched to the other part of my self; using my hands, creating things, investigating and inventing, creating stories. I applied to both architectural and art schools, and was accepted at both. I chose the arts and crafts, followed by the art academy in Oslo.

Could you identify a specific artwork that has influenced your artistic practice or has impacted the way you think about race and ethnic identity in visual culture?

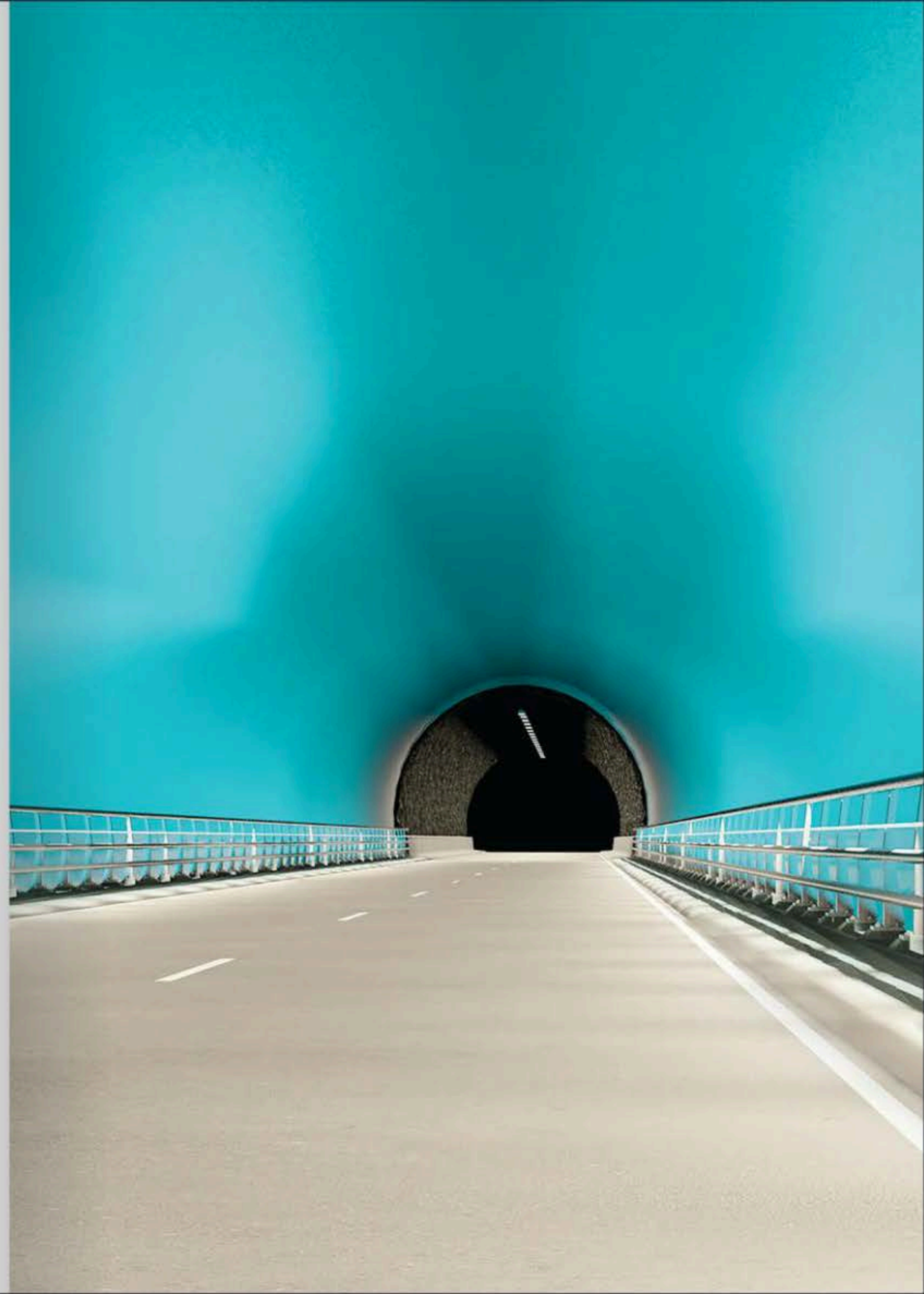
Oh, it is not a simple answer to that question!

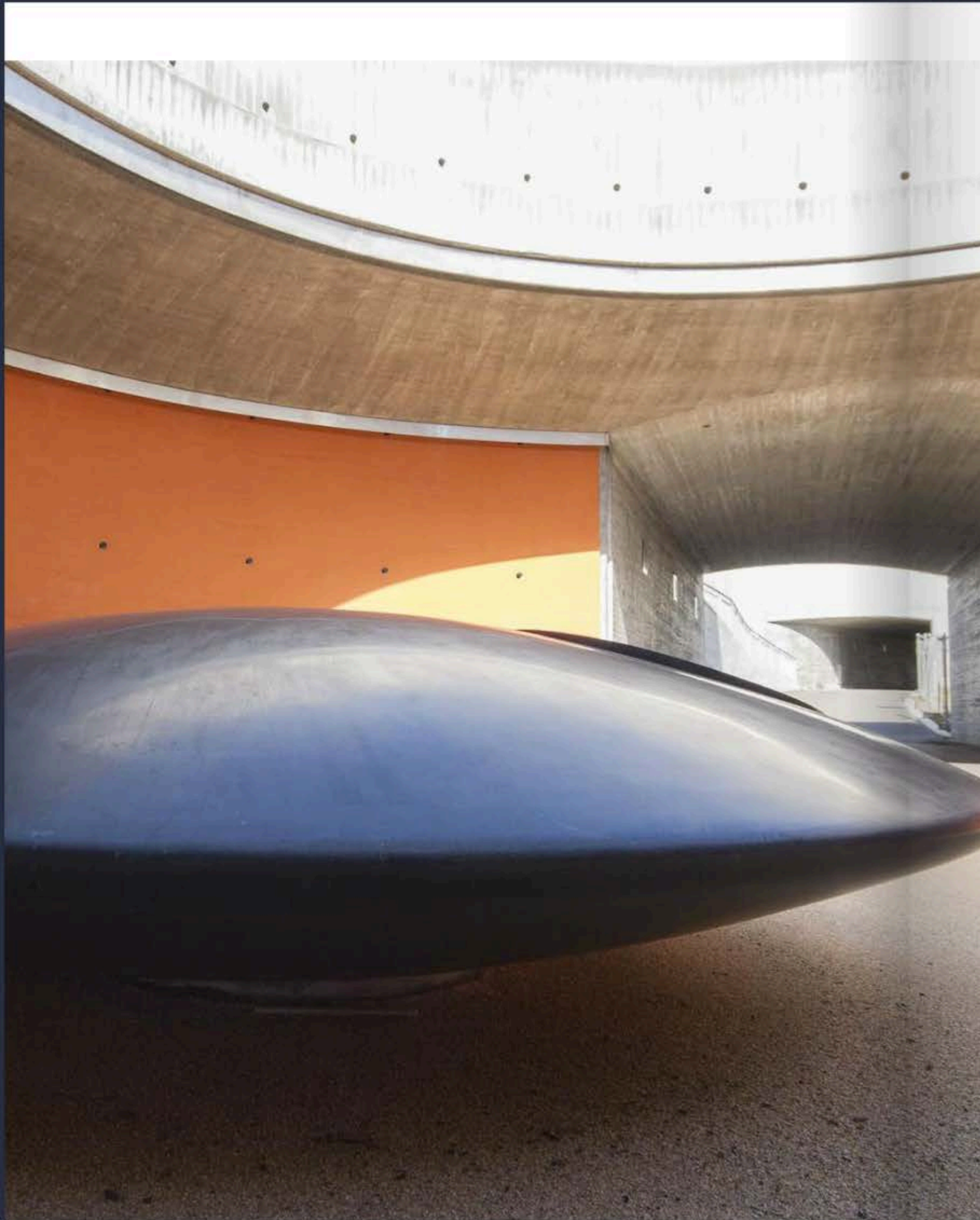
During my practice as a visual artist, I have been more and more aware of how light influences me. Of course, growing up in the far north, Norwegians are doomed to circle their life around the ever changing daylight following the seasons; depressive during the dark winter, delirious during the light summer. We are so to speak, a bi-polar people!

In the beginning of my art career I was very attracted to the candy shop-like room, full of all the world's light technique I could dream of, but now I find it more and more interesting to be aware of the very subtle shifts in natural light, and how to use that light into my art works, either directly or metaphorical. I have left the candy shop now. The light technique per se does not interest me, it is just a question about how much you pay to get good technicians and the right stuff.

What interests me is what the light means as a human experience, and how to use light as material, a kind of paint or surface or construction in an art installation. To catch the light in such a way that the audience could confront it with their mind and body. Light is inter-human and inter-religious. It is a common visual communicative language.

Most artists are dealing with shades of light in one or another way, but when using light more directly as material and matter, as I often do in my art projects, it is impossible not to be affected by James Turrell's work; how he manages to use light in such a sophisticated way. Many criticise him for repeating himself, commercialising the Skyspace by putting it up all over the world. I have visited and spent quite a lot of time in different Skyspaces, and it is a different experience in every space! Depending on the latitude, temperature, humidity, time of day and year, natural sky light or mixed with the programmed inner light, combined with the mood in your mind and body, you will never see the same light and colours. And you need to spend time in the space to experience it, and of course, since I am much more interested in the light's subtlety than many others, I can just sit there and let my gaze and thoughts go. It is very meditative.





As a part of the Art Committee at the new Ekeberg Sculpture Park in Oslo, I suggested that we should invite James Turrell to propose a site specific art work for us, and he has made a beautiful combined art work in an old water tank; a combination of two light works, a Ganzfeld and a Skyspace situated under a pond. You will not find this combination any place in the world. And because of this collaboration with him in Oslo, I was lucky to get the opportunity to visit his still ongoing masterpiece, The Roden Crater situated far out in the Arizona desert. To be in the crater was a huge, massive and subtle experience at the same time.

Good architecture of architects who know how to form space and light, like the works of Louis Kahn and for instance the convent La Tourette by Le Corbusier, where I stayed a couple of nights together with my architect husband when we were students, can give me the same physical experience, and can even influence me more than art.

With music it is the same. I go to lots of concerts and music festivals, and use different music as mind openers; a help to solve problems or to get energy. But I always get back to works by Steve Reich. His minimalist, repetitive compositions flows like mantras, small changes in system and rhythm creating new rooms. I am fascinated by how the immaterial like light and sound, can make physical visions of rooms and space.

**What in your opinion defines a work of art? And moreover, what could be the features that mark the contemporariness of an artwork?**

An art work must tickle my curiosity. That does not mean that I need to like it, or even understand it, but it must show me some kind of opening into it's own world, hopefully different from my world. Of course, I can immediately be knocked out by the beauty of impressively well done art works, but every art work's challenge is to keep it live beyond its first impression, to go on living further in the audience's mind.

The contemporariness of an art work does not mean that it has to be from today, but how it strikes your mind compared to where you are in your life. Recently, the perception of coloured light from Joseph Albers' exhibited paintings stroke me really hard. I have always looked at his work as a part of my early training and thought I had left them behind. I discovered details in Velazques' paintings that I nonchalantly passed when I was younger, because a month ago my youngest daughter showed them to me in a new way. The contemporariness of an art work has the ability of stretching the mind further, independent of its date of creation. The

comprehension of contemporariness is therefore, in many ways, very personal.

Unfortunately, in our society today there are almost no arenas for going deep into profound art discussions, the importance of art, how art can be a way of thinking instead of just being recognised as investment objects, and artists being appreciated as important contributors to several areas in our society. Instead art and artists are being treated like ephemeral pop stars that people shallowly rate up and down, easily helped by several arts critics, though, keeping that narrow system well in shape.

**Is there any particular way you would describe your identity as an artist but also as a human being in dynamically changing, unstable times? In particular, does your cultural substratum/identity form your aesthetics?**

Yes, of course I am a result of my cultural background. I have always kept the inspiration I got from my old scientist friends from my parents work; to keep a childish open minded curiosity for life. I still cling to that. My interests of physical topics in nature like the sun's position, speed, light and reflections, sound and acoustics among others, can often influence my different art projects.

**What is the role of technique in your practice? In particular are there any constraints or rules that you follow when creating?**

I appreciate that I have crafts skills, I easily use tools and know different techniques, which makes it easy to communicate with other technicians, engineers, architects etc. about how to produce and turn my ideas to fruition.

But, being good with techniques, the ease of making things, can also be a barrier. Looking back to when I started at the Art Academy, one of my most important and formative challenges was when one of my professors denied me access to the workshop, and instead forced me to sit still at my table, thinking. I have never experienced such an empty mind, no ideas popped up. If I could not make things, I did not know what to do. I was scared to death, felt completely like a moron. I thought I had no future at that of any other art academy. But the professor had confidence in me, it took me at least half a year, maybe a year even, to tear down the protecting «cleverness barrier», and to dear to confront my self with that being an artist is all about becoming conscious and aware.

As a response, triggered by a certain situation, space,

people, smell or sound etc, I can start thinking about what to do and how to do it.

I try to approach every project with an open mind, with no pre-thoughts. Therefore, often when I am invited to art competitions or art commissions accompanied by particular wishes, I do not agree with their choices of the particular site. I am never afraid of arguing for what I think will be a better solution for a site specific art project. Sometimes they listen, sometimes not.

**How do you see the relationship between emotional and intellectual perception of your work? In particular, how much do you consider the immersive nature of the viewing experience?**

Working with visual art, for me the viewing experience is crucial. Not only by viewing, but also experienced by the presence of your body.

I have a three-dimensional mind, by that I mean I easily read two-dimensional drawings in scale and convert them to three-dimensional visions in my mind. When the idea is ready, I often have a clear inner view of how the art project will look like, and how it together with its surroundings will be perceived and experienced. I have no problems working in different scales, neither in a maquette nor in real one-to-one. It is crucial to understand the right scale. The real challenge is to explain the art idea and my visions in such a manner that people not used to understanding drawings and scale, or holding a skepticism towards art in general, still can perceive the project. An analogue, old fashioned maquette is a good tool to break through. It is so much easier to raise enthusiasm around a physical maquette than watch it digital on a screen. I believe that if the art project is not able to touch the audience emotions in a way, it is very hard to reach their intellectual perception of it. Especially when you are making art projects in public spaces, which I mostly do.

**Before leaving this conversation we would like to pose a question about the nature of the relationship of your art with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process, in terms of what type of language is used in a particular context?**

I would say yes, the issue of audience reception is a crucial component because my interests are to work in public areas and site specific. I am not the type going deep into the forest to make art only for myself

and my camera. I want my art to intervene where people are. I am happy when I with an art point of view, manage to change the ugly sites, the left overs and pee-infected underground pathways where no one really wants to go. But art cannot save a bad urban project, by being placed on top. The art way of thinking must be part of the process from the very beginning.

I have added another challenging dimension to several of my projects, by proposing art connected to infrastructure; like speed and therein the moving perspective. The audience has no more than a few seconds to perceive the art project. So the goal is that the art project must be simple enough to tickle their emotions and curiosity during the two-three seconds of perception, and contain enough complexity to keep developing further in their mind after passing it.

**There are few artistical "guidelines" that you follow in your projects. Among others,**

- The artist must dare to propose art projects outside the defined art world
- The artist and her idea must be able to withstand a collaborative process.

**Why are they particularly important for you?**

Well, I early realised that the art milieu was quite small and narrow minded, especially towards artists who are interested in site specific art. When I graduated in the middle of the nineties, site specific art projects and public art was esteemed with low value, and in many ways still are. I can understand that, seen from an investment point of view; site specific art works have no value in the art market, everyone is running after the pot of gold. That is also why there are so few art critics and interesting articles about site specific and public art. With no publicity, the theme does not seem to exist, neither artists connected to them.

I was restless and ambiguous, I saw potentials for site specific art projects in more or less undiscovered areas, like infrastructure and highways. And most important, I did not believe in being discovered by some powerful curator or gallery that would help me, so I decided to make it by my self, build up my career outside the defined art world.

There were no focus at the areas that interested me, I even got feedback from other artists that what I did provoked them. I felt quite alone, but I manage to create and bring several big art projects to fruition, which has given me an extraordinary experience and knowledge. I could not at all take that for granted if I had chosen the normal path. The choice I did back then, was one of my smartest choices I have done in life.



Time has changed, the opinion has changed, at least a little, the areas for how and where to make art has been widened. New generations of young artists are more openminded to make art outside the narrow art world, they have a more positive view on collaborations, and the opposite way; curators are also now turning their heads towards these areas.

Most of my proposed art projects are too big for me to deal with alone, so I am often part of different planning teams, as an independent artist. The most important thing is to be invited in to projects at an early stage, so the art foundation and art concept can contribute to defining the projects from the beginning. During the process I talk about art as a way of thinking, explaining the art project for people not interested in art. I have to convince the purchasers that spending money on my art projects, will raise the total value of the project; especially immaterial values like reputation, identity and traffic safety. And I have to be very confident about what the concept core of the art project is to survive processes that can span several years, be subject to changes, such as budgets or construction methods, and people in charge that quit being changed by new people with other agendas.

**Your artworks are often interdisciplinary; between architecture, landscape/land art, sculpture and they are often big projects, engaging different types of resources. Can you tell our readers more about the collaborative aspect of your work?**

There is quite a difference between the way of working with art commissions, and the ordinary way; with curators and an art committee as a secure buffer between the artists and the purchaser, contra working with art from a more solitude point of view. The ordinary way is a slow walk towards fruition, and it is expected that you deliver a piece of art. In the other way the artist is working on the same level as the architects, landscape-architects or engineers. It is a much more dynamic way of working. You have to be alert, be in front, and quickly comprehend changes or new constraints. I like that. The ordinary working process with art commissions is, in a way, a lonely process, but being a part of a collaborative theme is dynamic, it sharpens your ideas.

Artists working with big collaborative projects at similar level as mine, like Olafur Eliasson and Jeppe Hein, have solved their collaborations by running their own art companies with several employees. I prefer to stay alone, and then be linked up with teams

in each project. Anyhow, working with infrastructure is a very specialised knowledge, so we are a group of people spread around who have followed each other during many years now, and collaborated in many common projects. A loose team of people that like, trust and support each other.

I am still quite alone as a visual artist working continuously with art connected to infrastructure, and I do not think I know about any other female artists working like I do.

**Since we revolve around the issue of communication this time, we have one more question: in your opinion, can art change the future for inter-human communication?**

**How can art help us make sense of these complex histories?**

A big yes!

One of my fads is that art is a way of thinking rather than the result after a working period or process, like the sculpture, a painting or an object etc. By involving artists in different discussions about society, urban planning or other social relationships, artists can elevate projects they are involved in. Of course, artists are not an homogenous group of people. Some artists can neither communicate nor collaborate. But there are artists today who collaborate in big projects of importance to society. I would say, at the same free level as philosophers, but with a more practical point of view. Sometimes though, I think of myself, that my position in such settings is to be the Jester.

Let me give an example, how I as an artist, have changed a projects mentality: The road planning project I am involved in now, E39 Rogfast in the Stavanger region, where the Public Roads Administration are planning to construct the worlds longest and deepest sub-sea road-tunnel in the world, the deepest point is approximately 385 m beneath the sea level. By pointing out how they could win the opinion by using this very special project to develop new ways and new thoughts, - or, so to speak, coordinate already existing knowledge; how to construct roads and tunnels in a more climate friendly way, I talked about art projects dealing with these issues, how artists work in the field, and showed them examples. A small seed started to grow. It is almost banal, but putting climate friendly solutions on the top of the project pyramid, has never occurred to the Public Roads Administrations. In arbitrary details here and there, yes, but never as the leading theme, and

not at all thoughts about possibilities of maybe gaining energy from a huge project like this. Now they do. This project is pointed out to be a pilot project for research and new solutions.

**Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Viel. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?**

I have always worked with several parallel projects, with different deadlines. Even though I sometimes feel that the projects nearly crush me, I like the dynamics between them. Being forced to leave the flow of one project because another project's deadline needs to be respected, might release new thoughts that could elevate the first one.

Right now I am working with three art projects connected to new infrastructure; the E39 Rogfast, mentioned above. My proposed art project here is still in it's beginning. The second art project is connected to the Ryfast project, another deep sub-sea road-tunnel at the west coast where I have sculpted two huge bedrock rooms filled with light. The process has been ongoing since 2012, and construction will start up next year. It is so exiting, I am really looking forward to go deep down there and follow the construction. The third infrastructure art project is along the new E134, passing the city of Kongsberg, where I have proposed to cut site specific sculpted forms directly in a long and high rockfall, which really challenges the constructors how to blast the rockfall before sculpting it. I cross my fingers that they will manage; to create something directly in a rockfall has been a dream for 25 years.

I also work with normal art projects; creating a hovering indoor sculpture to a military camp high up north, - where there is no sun a few months during winter, and a proposal for an outdoor sitting sculpture for a small city in a narrow west coast fjord, - where the sun never reaches the ground between November and February.

As you might have guessed; light is an issue in all the mentioned projects.

In the last ongoing project; a land art project proposed to Rebild in North-Jutland in Denmark, we are still trying to get sponsorships for realization. It is hard to persuade people to open their pockets. It is a good project.

I have time.