

Artist Olafur Eliasson on Little Sun



Little Sun transforms the light that is for all of us into light that is for each of us.

Around 1.1 billion people worldwide currently live without access to the electrical grid. Many rely on kerosene lanterns for lighting, but kerosene is expensive and a health hazard. A ten-year-old doing her homework in the evening to the light of a wick-based kerosene lantern breathes in an amount of pollution equivalent to smoking 40 cigarettes per day.

Light is for everyone – it determines what we do and how we do it. It has a clear functional and aesthetic impact on our lives. I have always considered light to be more than just something that illuminates things. Life and light are actually inseparable, and for some time now, I have wanted to work not just with light in museums and exhibitions, but to do something where I use light in a more ambitious way that is integrated into the world.

This is why, together with engineer Frederik Ottesen, I have developed the solar powered lamp Little Sun. What is interesting about solar energy is that it takes something that is for all of us – the sun – and makes it available to each of us.

Little Sun uses the natural energy of sunlight where electricity is not available, reliable, or affordable.

By replacing kerosene lanterns with Little Sun lamps, a family living off-grid can reduce their lighting energy costs by 90% over two years – and receive 10 times stronger and better quality light. Five hours of natural sunlight converts to a full evening of Little Sun light. Little Sun makes light for living – for cooking, eating, for reading, writing, for looking, for looking at.

It is the foundation for studying, for social encounters, aesthetic experiences, work, and commerce. Little Sun is a work of art that works in life.

Over the years, I have explored our modes of perceiving space, time, and society. My artworks amplify our senses and how they work. They invite visitors and users to consider and reconsider how they perceive and understand the world and to question what it means to live and act in our societies today.

I find it important to critically engage in both local contexts and discussions, to contribute. Our active involvement has consequences for the world, and so does art. An artwork is never just the object; it is also the experience and its contextual impact, how it is used and enjoyed, and how it raises questions and changes ways of thinking and living. The same is true of Little Sun. The solar-powered light and the activities it enables are just one element of the artwork – equally important is the way it connects us and what it tells us about the current state of energy access. Its distribution, business plan, and successful integration into off-grid communities – its entire journey from production to usage – is also all part of the art.

Little Sun is a response to our present situation, where natural resources are no longer abundant. Energy shortage and unequal energy distribution demand that we reconsider how our life-sustaining systems function. I see Little Sun as a wedge to open up this urgent discussion from the perspective of art, to raise awareness about energy access and the unequal distribution of energy today.

