FEATURED BY MARINA CASHDAN

“do it” with Hans Ulrich Obrist:
The World’s Busiest Curator Talks
About the Latest Iteration of his 20-Year Project

Hans Ulrich Obrist (aka HUO) is the art world’s favorite curator. He’s also the art world’s busiest curator. Since 1991, the 45-year-old Obrist has curated and co-curated more than 200 solo and group exhibitions and biennials; he serves as co-director of Serpentine Gallery in London; he has recorded over 2,000 hours of interviews for his ongoing interview project; he is contributing editor of Abitare Magazine, Artforum, and Paradis Magazine; he is art advisor for the bi-annual Manchester International Festival; and he has one of our favorite Instagram feeds. So it’s no surprise that he was able to get 250 of the top artists to follow his prompt—to create a set of instructions for other artists to realize their work—which will be featured at the Manchester International Festival this week as the most comprehensive “do it” exhibition to date, “do it 20 13”. Artsy’s Marina Cashdan caught up with Obrist, where he disclosed the conversation that led to “do it”, the banal inspiration for the project’s name and logo, how artist Ryan Trecartin recently pushed him into social media, and his newest project, which explores his fascination with the first “digital native” generation.

Marina Cashdan: I've read that “do it” was conceived in Paris in 1993 as the result of a conversation between you and the artists Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier. Can you tell us any more about this conversation?

Hans Ulrich Obrist: A conversation with artists, architects, designers always somehow marks the beginning of my shows, and in this case it was a combination with the two French artists, Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier, whom I had met when I was a teenager, right at the beginning of my work. I had very regular conversations with them, and
they had always to do with exhibition formats. Both Lavier and Boltanski are very interested in these ideas of rules of the game, a very Duchampian idea—this idea that we mainly remember exhibitions that also invent a new rule of the game; and we spoke, really whenever we met, about what exhibitions invented new rules of the game, and what could be rules of the game of exhibitions. And then in 1993, we had this meeting at Café Le Select, in Montparnasse, which is just next door to the Coupole, which, historically, has always been an artist hangout. We were in the Café Le Select, and the other kind of conversation was really this idea about how exhibitions travel. As a curator I was very interested in that, because we always do these exhibitions which have a limited life span—they go maybe to two or three places, and then they will be dismantled—whereas somebody who organizes or directs operas, or writes theater plays, or a music piece, scores or text can be re-interpreted infinitely for centuries to come. And that’s really what Lavier and Boltanski said.

**MC:** You might say that for conceptual art less emphasis is placed on the materiality of an object and more interest is in the method of reaching that material object, including via instruction, from Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings to Fluxus, notably Yoko Ono’s 1964 book *Grapefruit.*

**HUO:** Yes, many artists work on such instruction pieces. Obviously it’s true for Fluxus, it’s true for conceptual art, where the instruction plays such an important role, and it’s true also for many different other art forms. We were very inspired by Yoko Ono’s pioneering *Grapefruit* book, because she was one of the very first artists who had done a big solo exhibition in the form of an instruction book, and that was the famous *Grapefruit* book. There’s a notion of instruction also relevant for installation art, because whenever an artist does an installation, which then comes down and is reinstalled in the future, there is a kind of a scar, or a kind of partition, when it gets reinstalled, maybe at a later date, by the artist or someone else. That’s really what Boltanski and Lavier were mentioning—this idea of installation, but also actually how translation will change if we would have
an exhibition made of instruction, or if the instruction were to be translated into many languages. So it not only has to do with repetition, but it has to do with difference. And these are all things we discussed in the three- to four-hour-long meeting.

MC: Was it envisioned as a book or mainly an exhibition?
HUO: We said that it should be a book, and that the book would become the exhibition and the book will circulate very widely. I got very excited about this idea, because I was always interested by Seth Siegelaub—who was so instrumental doing early conceptual exhibitions, that the exhibition is the book, or the book is the exhibition—and Lucy Lippard with her amazing exhibitions in Seattle. For example, a set of cards with instructions, was the publication, but it was also the instruction according to which the exhibition got built. So these are all things on our mind.

MC: How is “do it” different from earlier explorations of instruction that came from conceptual art and Fluxus? Has the Internet changed or shaped the project at all?
HUO: One thing that I think was different to the ’60s or ’70s—there’s a whole history throughout the 20th century: Duchamp, already in the earlier part of the 20th century, sent his sister an instruction for a piece from Argentina to her balcony in Neuilly, so it’s also an umbilical cord through the 20th century—but what’s obviously changed in this age of globalization (which could already be grasped in the 1990s) is that doing it is a truly global endeavor, which raised other issues—how would we negotiate this form of globalization in a way that it doesn’t become a homogenized globalization, but a global dialogue which actually produces a difference? And that was a very important moment in that first conversation. The other thing that was important is, could we do an exhibition that would travel as widely as “The Family of Man”, the famous MoMA photography show, which went to so many places. And we said it would be interesting if “do it” could go to more places, but it obviously wouldn't be an exhibition which would be sent around the world. It would be an exhibition which would learn from the local context, so that each
time you would actually have instructions from local artists. And so that’s what happened already in the ‘90s. I mean, it went to Bangkok, to China, it went to Latin America early on.

**MC: So the recently published book with ICI is a record of the whole history of “do it”?**

HUO: The book is a history, a story of all these different learning experiences, because wherever the exhibition went, it learned. I think it’s a very arrogant thing for an exhibition to go out into the world and claim to know, to impose its knowledge to the world; it’s important to learn from different contexts. And that’s where, in this conversation with Lavier and Boltanski, early on, we were inspired by Edouard Glissant, the French philosopher, poet, critic, and writer, who said in globalization, it’s important to not, somehow, enhance globalization as a homogenized force, but what he calls “Mondialité”, and “Mondialité” for Glissant, in English you call it “Globality”. “Mondialité” is a difference enhancing global dialogue.

**MC: In the conversation at Café Le Select did you discuss more ideas for how you would package the project, i.e. how you would brand the project?**

HUO: Yes, there were some more banal issues that came up in our conversation: how we were going to do the catalogue. I asked Lavier and Boltanski if it should be a manual, and they said absolutely. And I lived next to the Jardin du Luxembourg at the time and so they had a lovely idea that on my way home from Montparnasse, to try to find manuals formachines. And that’s what happened. On the way home I passed by a shop for sewing machines, and the owner must have been 80 years old; it was a very old-fashioned store. And he had a Singer sewing machine in the shop window which must have been from the ’60s. It was probably from the same time as Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* book. And there was an instruction manual in this window. So I tried to convince the shop owner to sell me this manual, but he obviously wanted to sell me the sewing machine. I insisted, and after a 15-minute negotiation, he finally sold me the little book, for something like five francs. And that became the template for the
first “do it” book. The title, “do it”, came actually from Lavier and Boltanski, and the color orange came from me. The color orange was basically because in Switzerland, where I grew up, there’s a supermarket called Migros. It’s interesting because it belongs to the people; it’s almost like a [cooperative] kind of structure—it’s a supermarket that belongs to everyone, so millions of Swiss people are shareholders in this company. And they have a “Do it yourself” spirit as a company, and their color is orange. They have these orange signs. And for me, growing up with this, when Lavier and Boltanski said “do it,” I said, orange.

**MC:** “do it” has spawned a type of open exhibition model. Can you tell us about this model? Do you see it as a democratic or open-source model for exhibitions?

**HUO:** Yes, I hope that it’s a very open source, in some kind of way. I mean, Tim Berners-Lee invented the internet in ’89, and also ’93 was the beginning of awareness of the internet. I think I had my first email address in ’93 or ’94, so I think when we started “do it”, I wasn’t on email yet. But in ’94, I started to talk to Bruce Sterling, one of the early writers of Wired and one of the founders of the cyberpunk movement. And so Bruce Sterling was also instrumental to reflect off of the digital implication of “do it” and thinking of algorithms. And I think it was Nam June Paik who was the first artist who in the mid-’90s reflected directly the internet within the “do it” project by sending his assistant to a cyber-café, and giving his assistant an instruction of what to do in a cyber-café, and then you also have Casey Reas and Aaron Koblin—and more and more digital artists who also joined the project. But I would say the idea of somehow it being an open-source exhibition is something which at the beginning maybe wasn’t so conscious, but is something which definitely later on became more reflected in it. At the beginning we conceived it mainly as a museum idea and it grew over so many years; it’s a complex, dynamic system with feedback loops. It’s almost cybernetics; it’s a very nonlinear circuitry, the way it grew from A to B to C, again to A.
MC: “do it” takes many different types of exhibition models: “do it (museum)”, “do it (home)”, “do it (TV)”, “do it (seminar)”, anti-do its, “do it” online on E-Flux. How would you define these different models?

HUO: Quite soon after the museum version had taken off, and in many countries, I started to think it could be also be very interesting if it could happen at home. There could be home versions and so we started to invite artists to do home “do its”, which you find also in the book, and then at a certain moment there was a TV “do it”, so we started to think about how people could do it on television, and then people could do it at home. And that’s how from Damien Hirst to Nancy Spero, to Ilya Kabakov to Lawrence Weiner; about 15 artists created home “do its” for the TV. But “do it” can also leave the museum and the apartment, and go into the streets. I would say at least 20-25 instructions are actually for outdoors. And it’s also interesting that the Socrates Sculpture Park [in Queens, New York] had this idea for the first time to do an outdoor “do it”, an open-air “do it”. It really wasn’t our idea to do an outdoor “do it” version, it’s just that they suddenly started to look at these instructions, and to realize that there are so many versions to be realized outdoors; then they actually decided to do an outdoor version. And then Leon Golub invites us to protest against “do it”. He founded a movement of demonstrations to refuse to do it. So that’s sort of a counter-movement. A lot of artists have an awareness of what other artists have done before them, and I think that’s kind of interesting because if you think about the instruction of Cerith Wyn Evans, his instruction is not to do the Sol LeWitt piece. It’s basically ...

MC: ...an anti “do it”?

HUO: Yeah, and it’s also like when you have Rauschenberg erasing a de Kooning drawing. So we have in the book, one of the instructions by Sol LeWitt, but we have at the same time the instruction of Cerith Wyn Evans, whose instruction is to not realize Sol LeWitt’s “do it”, the wall drawing of ’99, because then the reader, or the museum, or whoever does it, has to make a decision to either follow Sol LeWitt, to “do it”, or to follow Evans and to not do the Sol LeWitt. And then you have Rosemarie Trockel who
basically does the opposite of Evans. She picks her favorites in the book, and then invites the reader, or whoever does it, to go to page 72, 88, 166, 167 and so on, and to do it again. So that’s the “do it again” idea. So a little over time, these different versions grew, and the book with ICI, and also the exhibition in Manchester, tried to bring for the first time together all these different versions.

**MC:** The exhibition opening as part of the Manchester International Exhibition, “do it 2013”, is divided between four rooms—the Homage Room, the Archive Room, the Active Room, and “do it” TV. Are there scores that play to, or use, the city of Manchester?

**HUO:** Yes, in Manchester, the museum decided to have several of these pieces go beyond the boundaries of the museum. **Allora & Calzadilla** invite you to revolve all the light pole lamps in a street to face up. And **Ai Weiwei** leads us as well into the outside space, actually giving the instruction to make a device to block surveillance cameras.

**MC:** Your Instagram feed is one of our favorites here at Artsy. Do you give the artists prompts to respond to, or just ask them to write anything? Is this, in some way, your own “do it” score shared via a social media platform? And will you ever start a “do it” (Instagram), or a “do it” (Twitter)?

**HUO:** It’s interesting that you mention Instagram because I think that my Instagram feed actually has a lot to do with “do it”, because like “do it”, it continues to grow, and in another way, “do it” grew out of a conversation with artists. And actually Ryan Trecartin is at the origin of the Instagram project, because I was actually in Ryan Trecartin’s studio in December, to talk about “do it”, and he said, ‘Are you on Instagram?’ and I said, no. So he took my iPhone, downloaded Instagram, and posted on his iPhone a photo of me sort of joining Instagram. And at the beginning, I didn’t really know what to do. But already in that first visit, in [Ryan’s] studio, in the house, it’s full of traces of previous performances and film shoots—it’s really more than a house, it’s a studio, it’s a lab, it’s a place for experiment—and there was this amazing calendar in his office made by hand, and I took a
photograph of his hand pointing at his calendar, and that led to the project because then I was really aware that that image included art and other images. But then a few weeks later, I re-read an essay by Umberto Eco, who talks about the disappearance of handwriting, and actually a lot of people nowadays use handwriting less because of the internet. I was thinking it’s interesting because you can obviously lament the disappearance of handwriting, but much more interesting than that would actually be to make handwriting exciting again, and celebrate handwriting within this media. So that started me [on this project]. Whenever I meet an artist or an architect or a writer or a poet, I ask them to either hand-write or email me [an image of a hand-written] sentence, which I would then photograph or upload on Instagram. And so on a daily basis I’m posting these sentences and it becomes hopefully a positive process to basically introduce handwriting into Instagram and Twitter. And it’s again like “do it”—I couldn’t have predicted, when Lavier and Boltanski and I started in this coffeehouse, that in 20 years, 250 artists would participate and more than 100 exhibitions would take place. The handwriting project is in much earlier stages.

**MC: Speaking to your other projects, I’m particularly excited about the 89plus project you’re working on with curator Simon Castets. Can you talk about that research project and how it’s being manifested as physical events, including the forthcoming Serpentine Gallery Marathon in October—the ninth annual two-day-long series of discussions devoted to a particular topic?**

**HUO: Yes, it’s actually very connected, because this year of the 20th anniversary of “do it” is also the beginning of the 89plus project, a project similar to “do it” in that it’s a long-duration project; it will grow and evolve over time. It started when Simon Castets and I met four years ago in Yokohama, [Japan]. We talked a lot about this new generation, which is really the first generation that is Internet native. This leads us back to Tim Berners-Lee who invented the Internet in ’89, and ’89 was also the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and many other things happened in ’89; and we
said that it would be very exciting to start to look at this new generation, born in ’89 onwards. We wanted to make this research in all kinds of disciplines, so not only art, but also in technology and in science, and music, and just somehow look globally into what these different practitioners are doing. So the founding moment was at the DLD conference in Munich in January, followed by a conference in Art Basel in Hong Kong [in May], and with our colleagues Jochen Volz and Lucia Pietroiusti, we will develop [this as the topic] for the Serpentine Gallery Marathon during Frieze week October 18-19, [2013], in the Sou Fujimoto Pavilion, the annual Serpentine Pavilion scheme which [Serpentine co-director] Julia Peyton-Jones invented in 2000. There is also a link again to Ryan [Trecartin], because in an interview in the New York Times at the moment of his MoMA PS1 show [in 2011], Ryan [spoke about] how exciting he thinks the generation of artists born in the ’90s is and that he cannot wait to see their work, and now obviously we are at the moment in 2013 that we can actually start to see the work of this generation. And so we hope also that the project will support these emerging artists in a way which is sustained, for example, stipends, grants, and residencies are a very important part—the long-term support to help these artists to produce reality.

*Instagram images include handwritten notes by Kanye West, Lawrence Weiner, and Marina Abramovic. Artworks: Fischli & Weiss, Moon Over Takasi, Courtesy of the artists; Michelangelo Pistoletto, Sculpture for Strolling, photo by Bruno Bruchi. Portrait and catalogue shot courtesy of ICI. “do it 2013” is on view July 5th through September 22nd, 2013 at Manchester Art Gallery. See the new publication on the history of the project, *do it: the compendium* (ICI and DAP, May 2013) and explore the exhibition on Artsy.*

26 LIKES
GOOD TASTE IS A GIFT

BUT BAD TASTE IS A PRIVILEGE

[Signature]
Do it? or perhaps do it not.

Hans Ulrich Obrist

Artists don't have rights to solitude

Marina Abramovic

http://artsy.net/post/editorial-do-it-with-hans-ulrich-obrist-the