

Labomatic

with Jean-Max Colard, 2002

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If he hadn't fallen into the art world, Hans Ulrich Obrist could have either become another Einstein or an airplane steward. He might as well have his own airline company, as this tireless globetrotter always seems to be in between places. One could cross paths with him in Frankfurt or Hong Kong, or find him sleeping in a transit hall, always flanked by his loyal companion – a constantly connected laptop computer – checking his e-mail. This Swiss exhibition curator is also a “mad scientist,” who conceives of his job as a “maker” of exhibitions, as others might be dedicated to pure research.

He looks like an obsessed mathematics student with his disheveled multilingualism (in high school, he bought La Pravda in a kiosk and then signed up for Russian language classes in order to be able to read it!), and indeed his exhibitions take on the form of a laboratory – working with artists, scientists, architects, and philosophers. With his accelerated speech running faster than my tape recorder, Hans Ulrich Obrist is not only a multi-connected UFO, he is above all, someone close to artists and who has contributed most to changing the artistic landscape of the 1990s.

“My medium is the exhibition” – and he has made all sorts: solo and group, whether taking place in his kitchen or taking over the giant film-screens on the streets of Seoul; in the rooms of museums or in the sewers of Zurich. He is incessantly changing formats, durations, habits, and rules of the exhibition – this floating framework upon which the history of 20th century art is written. Along the way, he has discovered dozens of artists all over the world, he has imported the English and Nordic scenes to France, and he has demonstrated the incredible energy of Asia in “Cities on the Move.”

His method? A continual conversation, followed up relentlessly through dozens of emails, interviews, and discussions with all sorts of creative minds in art today, from Douglas Gordon to the architect Rem Koolhaas, from Fischli/Weiss to French artists – Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster – from the robotician Luc Steels to the sociologist Bruno Latour. He is attentive to the desires as well as the needs of artists, and in return, unfailingly responds to their expectations, even if he has to break the conventions and habits of the biggest museums in the world.

with Jean-Max Colard

Traveling non-stop, Hans Ulrich Obrist has been based in Paris for several years, which he considers the best place for contemporary art. I had the occasion to squeeze in two hours in his small office at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, twelve square meters of mess, under a constantly flowing avalanche of books. And so I met this catalyst of energy, this test tube with a thousand ideas in his head.

Hans Ulrich Obrist — There isn't a word in the French language to describe my line of work. In German, it's simple: I am an “Ausstellungsmacher,” a “maker” of exhibitions. In France, it's more complicated: one says “commissaire d'expo,” but that's actually the dictionary definition, and doesn't correspond at all to my non-authoritarian concept of the exhibition. Or otherwise, curator, a word too medical; or again, art critic, but that doesn't describe the same activity. Sometimes I write about art, but it's pretty rare. My medium is the exhibition.

Jean-Max Colard — How did you become interested in art? Through your parents?

No, I come from a middle class family without any relation to the art world: my mother taught and my father worked as a controller. I was born in Zurich, in May 1968, a good date (but not in Paris); May 1968 didn't arrive in Zurich until 12 years later, in 1980. My parents lived near Lake Constance, and I went to school in Kreuzlingen, a non-place, but a sort of Twin City to the German city of Konstanz. We crossed the border three times a day; and as soon as there was a break in school, we'd go to Germany. From there, perhaps, came my notion of travel, of crossing-over, which I have always adopted in terms of my way of working. This was around 1982–83, at the age of 13–14 years, that I started to be interested in art. I went to high school in Switzerland, and I started very early traveling

between Basel, Zurich, Bern, and Geneva to see many exhibitions.

Retrospectively, how do you explain your interest in art and not for the cinema or music, like other teenagers in the 1980s?

It's difficult to say... Switzerland offers a tremendous density of contemporary art exhibitions, and so that must have been, without a doubt, one of the factors. But I also think that artists have a foreknowledge about everything surrounding us, they have an intuitive relation to the world. They are sort of masterminds of the unthinkable, the impossible, of an unstable balance, of extreme points. All at once, art offers a huge possibility for destroying the bridges between disciplines and geographies, of navigating between the knowns, and for me, art offers up the chance to learn. I love to follow the way that philosophy, for example, migrates into the context of art. It becomes then the place where philosophy survives...often the art world complains about itself. But as an example, for the artist Carsten Höller, who had left the world of science and research, art was the best place to be.

Have certain meetings been decisive for you?

My meeting with Fischli/Weiss was important: ~~when I was at high school, I went regularly to visit them in their studio in Zurich,~~ which was like a sort of parallel school. But there are also "meetings" with books, which can be more important to one at this age. One book on Alighiero Boetti absolutely moved me: he was the owner of a hotel in Kabul in the 1970s, and he had whole villages in Pakistan and Afghanistan working for it. He was largely forecasting questions about globalization, and I always thought of him as a sort of European Warhol. Another book is ~~Alexander Dorner's *The Way Beyond Art*~~. He was a visionary personality, was very close to artists, and he was the director of the Landesmuseum of Hanover in the 1920s. He envisioned a Kraftwerk-type museum, a real

center of energy, that would be mobile, and which would serve as a model for the beginnings of the MoMA in New York. He permitted me to understand all the potentials of exhibitions and to envisage the museum as a "laboratory of looking."

What was your first exhibition?

Personally, I never studied artistic practice. ~~After high school, I studied sociology, economy, political science,~~ everything except art! At the same time, I informed myself about art. Suddenly, came the desire to organize exhibitions, knowing it was urgent and necessary: that always remained my first question. ~~Because routine is the absolute enemy of exhibitions,~~ and for me, each exhibit must be made as if it is the first time and must respond to necessity and urgency. ~~How can one change the rules of the game each time? Thus, my first exhibition was made in 1991 following a series of conversations with Fischli/Weiss, and with Christian Boltanski who I had met in Paris, on a high school trip. We had the idea to make a show in the kitchen of my studio in St. Gallen in Switzerland, tying back to exhibitions in the 1970s which took place in unusual sites. In four months, there had been only about thirty or so visitors: Hans-Peter Feldmann had put eggs in my refrigerator, Fischli/Weiss had placed immense food products on the shelves, 5 kilos of ketchup, 10 kilos of pickles, etc. Boltanski had made a small projection using candles in the garbage can – it was a sort of little miracle – art happens where you expect it the least. [❄ Musil dontstop]~~

There was also an exhibition at the Hotel Carlton Palace in Paris.... What was that?

In 1993, I made a show in room 703 [previously 763, ❄ dontstop: *découché?*] in this slightly decaying ex-palace on Blvd. Raspail, where Gloria Friedman, Bertrand Lavier and Raymond Hains all stayed, as well as some old ladies who had lived there for 30 years. It was a very strange

situation. The idea was to make a large group show in this tiny little space. In the beginning, the room was empty, and little by little one had to sleep with Annette Messager's stuffed animals. Fabrice Hybert installed one of his first POFs (prototype of a functional object) in the bathroom, a honeycombed bath rug. There was also a group show in the wardrobe: the visitor was invited to try on the clothes of Erwin Wurm or Marie-Ange Guilleminot. Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster had transformed the bathroom into a yellow room. Andreas Slominski sent an instruction everyday, as a sort of punishment for the curator, etc. For two months, from 10 am to 6 pm, I was the landlord, curator, exhibition guardian, and guide. I had met many people who came by, and that was the beginning of this ~~continual conversation~~ which remains one of the most active aspects of my working method.

Do many exhibitions seem too conventional to you?

Yes, one often finds oneself in formats which are a bit too fixed, without innovation in terms of spatial and temporal dimensions, with a determined duration and with typical or predictable artists. One must ceaselessly question these conventions and ~~change the rules of the game~~. The exhibitions which have changed things since the end of the 19th century were all radical experiments, which have modified modes of the presentation of art, like the Dada Fair in Berlin in the 1920s or Marcel Duchamp's exhibition on surrealism, where there was a particular architecture – even a sort of cave ... For me, it was a bit like the manner of the Russian dolls, one show a bit hidden within another, and I ask myself always how it can develop a life. It's not simply about an opening or a closing, but a whole and autonomous life, a living organism which learns things, which evolves and lasts longer than the closing date. Hence, I always searched to invent other forms of trajectories.

Other examples?

In 1993, I installed the Robert Walser museum in a restaurant where he often stopped in during his walks. The restaurant still exists, and the exhibition has really infiltrated itself there, like a supplement. It was a kind of literary museum, and I held onto this desire to cross not only sites and places, but also disciplines. I continued with a series of exhibitions in inhabitable places: Boltanski's books in the medieval library in St. Gallen in 1991, and Gerhard Richter in Nietzsche's house in Sils Maria. Later, I invited artists to the sewer museum in Zurich. I didn't want these shows to ~~turn into routine~~, into exoticism, or ~~to become like a signature~~, and so I started to be interested in contemporary art museums, to co-organize group shows like "life/live" on the English scene with Laurence Bossé, and "Cities on the Move" on Asia with the Chinese curator Hou Hanru, etc.

Is an exhibition a critical activity?

Above all, I find that there is often a lack of experimentation, that one is always too afraid to fail. For example, "Laboratorium," in 1999 in Antwerp, was an exhibition where one had experiences, and ergo, errors. The exhibition is not a product to sell, but something that asks questions – there is a will to understand. This type of exhibition is truly lacking, and this idea of an experimental radicalism seems to me to be too rare. I think that big museums need and perhaps have a duty to turn the smallest entities into studios for pure research. We know that large museums have a project room dedicated to young artists, but that becomes quickly ghettoized. Against this principle, at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, with Suzanne Pagé and Béatrice Parent, we developed the "Migrateurs" series, starting in 1993: it's the idea of an exhibition with irregular dates, which permits an artist to intervene there, or if he/she wants, in the collections, but also in the cafeteria, in the toilettes, or on the museum's exterior. For example, Douglas Gordon inserted a text in the collection and introduced a virus in

the telephone system. It's a supple formula, migratory and unforeseeable in the interior of the museum. There have been more than 25 "interventions" ever since.

One imagines you always on a voyage, between airport waiting rooms... How do you see yourself exactly?

I always have a city where I spend 3–4 days per week, and without that I can't concentrate. In the beginning, it was Frankfurt, then Vienna, Berlin, later on it was London, and now it is Paris. My central activities take place at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Outside of that research, conferences, and exhibitions take up the rest of my time. At the same time, e-mail permits me to constantly stay in contact. E-mail, as well as the Internet, though less-so, have completely changed the way we work in the art field.

Don't you often have the impression that you're the incarnation of the "connected" man described by Luc Boltanski in the New Spirit of Capitalism: adaptable, flexible, always connected?

No, I think that resistance is very important. In fact, it happens between the voyage and the non-voyage, between slowness and acceleration. Because there's the intimacy of dialogue, and paradoxically that's something very slow. All week long, I have very slow conversations with artists and philosophers, and I sort of consider this continual conversation as the spine of my work. There's an oscillation between the "connected" man and the unconnected man, and, as an example, the night train, which I took for a long time traveling through Europe, is a tremendous tool for reflection, a place and a moment of complete de-connection. Today, one must choose one's mode of communication, because one cannot respond to everything at the same time... So, I decided to work only by e-mail, to be unreachable by telephone, really only using my voice mail. But I know people who have decided to not have e-mail, to not correspond by anything but fax. Each person negotiates the present moment, oscillating between connection and de-connection.

Even so, I remember that you had really appreciated the theft of your mobile phone. Isn't that an acute connection?

Yes, it's true! I was walking down the street, I was on the phone with the architect Cedric Price, who is one of my biggest heroes, and who designed the most visionary projects like the Fun Palace, like "Cities on the Move," a university on wheels, etc. We were speaking about the distortion of time, the fourth dimension, and what that would mean for architecture, when suddenly my mobile phone was stolen... Some guy on a motorcycle took it and disappeared into the urban web. It was a strange moment, with Cedric Price on the other end of the line who didn't understand what had happened, who didn't follow the conversation, but who found himself on a motorcycle. It wasn't violent, but very "fluid-city." In the beginning, by my own personal obsession in sparking spontaneous meetings, I would never give out my mobile phone number to another person. Now I always leave it off, but I continue the work of a sort of border escort. I see myself often as a trigger, a catalyst.

So, don't you think about having applied contemporary ideologies about flexibility to your life?

That would be a huge stress. The danger of the connected man is amnesia, because one is fastened to the present by permanent connectivity, and that does not produce memory. On the contrary, I've always maintained relations with artists from earlier generations, like Yona Friedman or Cedric Price, with writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet or Nathalie Sarraute. I am often asked if my laboratory concept, and my taste for experimentation is terribly nostalgic for the 1960s and 1970s. Personally, I think of it more as a sign of resistance to complete immersion in the connectionist era. It's dynamic memory, not nostalgia.

Does travel also correspond to a new art-geography in the 1990s?

Yes, there are no longer only two or three capitals, but a multiplication of unique sites of activity. I understood that when I went to Glasgow in the beginning of the 1990s, to Transmission, an art space where artists organized exhibitions themselves; an incredible generation of artists emerged from there including Douglas Gordon, Christine Borland, Jonathan Monk... The United States doesn't have that – we never speak about, for example, something fantastic coming out of Pittsburgh or Detroit. It's perhaps true in music but not for art. In Africa and Asia there are dozens of cities which produce passionate artists, but it is above all in Europe where we have the impression that the centers are displaced, and we jump a bit from here to there, in a completely unpredictable manner. At the moment, we speak a lot about Italy, but tomorrow it could be Belgrade, or another city, another country. Recently I did some research in Zagreb and in Istanbul where I found some really effervescent scenes. One has the impression that it's happening a bit everywhere at the same time, and that is what makes the European context very exciting.

What about the artistic landscape has really changed in the 1990s?

It's difficult to speak about it in a general manner, because today, in the era of the post-medium, all practices co-exist: an artist can use video, installation, painting, drawing, the computer ... in return, one no longer sees the kinds of exhibitions where works come by transport, and one simply puts them on a wall. That was really happening in the 1980s, but at the end of the 1990s, it's become more and more rare. The notion of a work of art has changed, and also the way artists work. Often, works are produced in the context of this show or that show and are therefore ephemeral, even if you find another version of the work elsewhere. And then, there are also enormous amounts of collaborations throughout the 1990s between curators, and now the art dialogue is more and more related to other disciplines. For example, Pierre Huyghe is now working with the writer

Douglas Coupland, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster with Jay-Jay Johanson, and Melik Ohanian with the NASA scientist William Clancey... These collaborations do not necessarily lead to a finished work, but are formed over time as a constellation of experiences.

One often blames you for a certain laissez-faire, that your exhibitions are a bit thrown together, barely sketched out...

On the one hand, one must follow these projects very closely because without this dialogue an exhibition cannot succeed, and, on another hand, there is the will to let go into a permissive space, to stay open, self-organizing, where surprises can happen. The ideal exhibition is the "cell city": a space composed of autonomous cells, [similar to the t.a.z. of the Lyon biennial. See Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, anticopyright 1985] which do not intrude upon each other, but make links between the works. I love this idea of creating platforms where something can happen, and so the curator is not the controller, but the releaser. I am revolted by the curator who claims possession of "his" artists: to me this seems absurd. There is a constant balance in finding continual work executed with certain artists and a permanent research on finding other creators, other disciplines and generations. It has to do with a sort of foot plank: throwing away bridges between works, artists, between the public and the art. My work is to liberate the path, to be a catalyst, and, finally, to know how to disappear.