

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

(SERPENTINE GALLERIES)

In conversation with LUKE KERTON-JOHNSON Photographer GIÓ SBRIZ



Hans Ulrich Obrist, twice named the most powerful man in the art world by *ArtReview*, is the Artistic Director of Serpentine Galleries, London, and the pre-eminent curator of his generation. Hans Ulrich Obrist has curated over 300 shows, including “Do It,” the longest-running and most far-reaching exhibition of all time, and recorded over 4000 hours of interviews with some of the world’s leading artists, scientists, and writers, such as J.G. Ballard, Louise Bourgeois and James Lovelock. The loquacious and ever-energetic Obrist sits down with ODDA to discuss the perpetual becoming of ideas, the limits of institutions, the power of archiving, and the importance of preserving difference.

LUKE KERTON-JOHNSON. I would like to start with your childhood. Could you describe where you grew up and how this environment impacted your way of seeing the world? HANS ULRICH OBRIST. I was born in Zurich, but my childhood was in Weinfelden, a small town in eastern Switzerland. I went to school in Kreuzlingen, about 30 minutes away and adjacent to the Lake of Constance, which connects Switzerland, Austria and Germany. So it’s a triangle of three countries. It became a daily activity to sort of cross the frontier—it was a very transnational childhood. One would go to the movies in Germany, and one could swim to Austria in the lake. L.K.J. So lots of connections and transnationalism at a young age. H.U.O. Yes, and, at the same time, it was not the big city. I would later move to big cities because I felt something was absent during my childhood—there weren’t museums, exhibitions, and so on. The other important thing to mention is that there was this abandoned house that I always saw on my way to school. It was very spooky: empty, in a park, abandoned. I asked my teacher about this house, and they explained that it was a former clinic of the psychiatrist [Ludwig] Binswanger, the topic of one of Foucault’s theses. It was also the clinic where the famous German art historian Aby Warburg resided at some point. So for me, as a child, it was incredibly interesting to hear that Germany’s most legendary art historian had lived in this place. I then started to research him and discovered his famous “Mnemosyne Atlas,” which prompted me to do a little museum of postcards in my room in my parent’s apartment as a teenager.



L.K.J. Would you say that experience was a moment where your future path became clearer, a kind of epiphany, or was it still a bit hazy then and needed to keep developing? H.U.O. That's a very interesting question I've never thought about. When this sort of awakening happened, and I started to be really passionate about art at 12/13 years old, it was still very hazy. But then, when I was 15, I started to visit artists, and it became clear that I wanted to work with them somehow. In Switzerland, there was a very well-known curator called Harald Szeeman. He was a public figure, which was unusual then. That also helped quite a lot in clarifying what I wanted to do. So, with Szeeman, the idea of a curator came in when I was 16. It was hazy until then and very clear ever after. L.K.J. Do you think your definition of art when you were younger differs from what it is now, or has it remained fairly consistent? H.U.O. It's always evolving, of course, because art is changing what we expect from it. The amazing thing with art is that artists always push their limits—they create new rules of the game. I always learn from artists; with each encounter, it expands and evolves. But, at the same time, some ideas artists introduced me to at the beginning have certainly stayed with me. I visited Gerhard Richter when I was 17, and he would tell me, "Art is the highest form of hope." I still believe that is true today. I also remember a lecture by Joseph Beuys when I was a teenager. Beuys spoke about "the expanded notion of art." As a result, I realized that if curating follows art and if art expands the notion of what art is, curating, as a consequence, has to follow artists and expand the notion of what curating is. These are ideas which stayed with me ever since. But it has also evolved and is evolving. L.K.J. You mentioned Harald Szeeman earlier. You're famous for your "Kitchen Show," which you organized in the kitchen of your student apartment at age 23. This is, of course, similar to Szeeman's exhibition "Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us;" in both cases, there is an inversion of the traditional private/public divisions. Do you think it's important to remind audiences of the potential for art in the everyday? Is that something that's constantly at the forefront of your mind? H.U.O. Yes, absolutely—that's always present. I didn't grow up in a household where my parents would have art books around or take me to museums. And so, how art entered my life had to do with, in a way, how art came into our household. For example, my mother always brought this medicine by Emma Kunz, who was a painter of spiritual abstraction. On the package was this drawing of hers that I was magnetically attracted to, always looking at it and wanting to find out more. The timetable of the Swiss railway system would also have artwork on the cover every day. I remember Claude Sandoz, the Swiss artist, did one of these, which prompted me to make my first studio visit to him. So, I was always very grateful that art had arrived through these mobile exhibitions in our household. For this reason, when I later became a curator, I always wanted art to go beyond the museum. I did exhibitions like "Do It," which is still ongoing—an exhibition made with how-to manuals and instructions, where artists give instructions, and everybody can realize them in their household, wherever they are. Or with "Take Me, I'm Yours," which was my first show at Serpentine in the '90s, where each visitor could take artworks, and so the exhibition then expanded into the homes of hundreds of thousands of people. At Serpentine, we are constantly working with artists to find ways to go beyond the perimeters of the gallery. L.K.J. You have recently said you dream of starting a school based on Black Mountain College. The school's interdisciplinary, holistic approach to education seems at odds with the hyperspecialization of the current education system. Do you think current institutions limit artistic, spiritual, and cultural expansion? H.U.O. We live in a society where there are a lot of silos—institutions that do not necessarily reflect the fluidity of practice of many practitioners in the 21st century. Many artists now freely move between poetry, architecture, art, technology, and music. These artists even invent their own structures, their own businesses, their own institutions. I think we need institutions that can reflect that. The late poet and artist Etel Adnan, a dear friend who passed away last year, always said, "The world needs togetherness, not separation. The world needs love, not suspicion. And the world needs a common future and not isolation." We need our institutions today to reflect that. There are two possibilities: either we can transform existing institutions, or we need to start new institutions. I've always thought that it's really interesting that there have been experiments like the Black Mountain College or, in more recent history, the Institut Des Hautes Études En Arts Plastiques in Paris, which many of my artist friends attended. It was incredible. It was just



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because you are not constantly worrying about making the most of the service you are paying for. You are less likely to take risks if education is a transaction; you become concerned with efficiency instead. H.U.O. Absolutely. With art, there can be the idea that there is immediately an outcome, that there is immediately a result. That was not the case in this institute. It was very important that it was so interdisciplinary. Sometimes the inspiration comes from where you expect it least. At least in my curatorial life, my influential mentors were often from outside the boundaries of the art world. For example, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood came together with the idea of the Fun Palace—a resolutely interdisciplinary institution that almost got realized in London in the early '60s. It would have been a participatory organization where all the disciplines would meet: you could have an opera, a concert, or a classroom. Cedric became a great inspiration for me and he also taught me that we have to question this idea of the master plan of an exhibition. You can sometimes also have no plan; an exhibition can grow organically. L.K.J. And Édouard Glissant? H.U.O. Yes—I've learned so many things from Édouard Glissant. Glissant said there are two dangers with the globalized world we live in. For one, there is the homogenized globalization fuelled by technology. This will make us lose a lot of things: languages disappear, species

a room. Once a week, the directors would invite a great artist who happened to be in Paris, such as Claes Oldenburg and Michael Asher, or the philosopher [Jean-Francois] Lyotard, and they would converse all day. And what is also very important about this school was that people didn't have to pay to attend, but *they* were paid. This allowed a lot of artists who would never have had the economic means to attend such an incredible school to attend. L.K.J. It also removes the pressure

Barbara Chase-Riboud: Infinite Folds © Barbara Chase-Riboud 2022.
Photo by © Jo Underhill, courtesy Serpentine.



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disappear, etcetera. But he said, at the same time, there is a counter-reaction, which is new forms of localisms, nationalisms, and a lack of tolerance. We can see that now all over the world. And so, he said we need to dispose of that and negotiate a truly global dialogue, that does not lead to the disappearance of differences but, instead, the production of new realities. And so, for me, that is important for every exhibition I do. L.K.J. You have conducted roughly 4000 hours of interviews for “The Interview Project.” Many of these interviews are several hours long and occurred across multiple days. What is it about the long form of dialogue that attracts you? Is it, again, the sense of not giving something a determined or terminal end stop and, instead, letting it develop naturally? H.U.O. The idea of long duration is really important to my life

and work. Some of my exhibitions, like “Do It,” have been going on for 30 years now. It has to do with lifelong learning. I always want my exhibitions to learn. It is quite arrogant to do an exhibition that pretends to know everything. That’s something that fascinates me also, a lot with video games. We now have this exhibition at Serpentine with Gabriel Massan and friends, a video game called “Third World: The Bottom Dimension.” In the process of making this, we realized that when you launch a video game, it’s not the same as releasing, let’s say, a movie. Once a movie hits the cinemas, it’s very unusual for it to be massively edited whilst it’s being shown, whilst the video game is this kind of complex, dynamic system with feedback loops. It’s an ever-evolving thing. I realized that the world of video games has been doing what I do with exhibitions, which in the world of exhibitions is rather unusual, for a very long time. So that’s sort of a side note to your question because our exhibitions are kind of long duration. L.K.J. And the dialogues? H.U.O. My dialogues with artists are long duration because it is fascinating to work with one person over 20-30 years. I’ve worked with many artists I met as a teenager ever since whilst always being open to new generations. The work of the curator has to involve both continuation and opening. It’s the opposite of ticking a box. It’s not that you work with an artist; then that box is ticked, and you move on. It takes time for the dialogue to evolve. L.K.J. What led you to begin archiving the conversations? H.U.O. I was in a cafe with Jonas Mekas in the early ‘90s. Jonas was filming with his super eight cameras, as he always did, and said, “You meet all these amazing, wonderful people, and you’re going to regret it one day when you’re older that you don’t film it.” So I began filming them. And, of course, if they are re-

corded, they can be transformed into something else, a book or an anthology, for instance. My conversation with [James] Lovelock was from a recording of one afternoon, a long seance. The editor, Sebastian Clark, listened to the tapes and realized that when I left his house, I forgot to switch the camera off while he accompanied me to the car. So there is this magical epilogue that I had no idea existed. It’s only two or three minutes, but it became the last two pages of the book and is maybe the most important part. L.K.J. You mentioned Jonas Mekas. His film “As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty,” is made up of 30 years of home video footage and is one of the best examples of an artist immortalizing not simply themselves as an idea but, in a way, their entire life. Do you plan to make something in this vein, a magnum opus stemming from the archive? Or is that the archive itself? H.U.O. That is a super interesting question, but it may be too early to answer. I haven’t quite figured it out. But it’s something I do think about a lot. I’ve written an autobiography recently: “A Life in Progress,” published by Le Seuil in France. Most of my books are always about other people and the practices they’re trying to make visible. But my friend Bernard Comment has been trying to make me write a more personal book for years and years. He said your DIY approach might inspire people and give them courage and hope. And that convinced me. I only want to do things if they are useful for the field, art, and the world. And, to return to your question, there are these 4000 hours and these hours have a lot of common ground. The common ground is, of course, certain topics I consider urgent which always come back. I would always ask the person I interview about their unrealized project, things which haven’t happened, utopias, dreams, etcetera. I always also ask how you begin, because I think it’s fascinating how people start. Is there an epiphany? Is there a revelation? Very similar to what you asked me about childhood, about beginnings. It’s inspiring to read about these things. I always also ask, what’s the first thing in your resume? L.K.J. What would you say yours is? H.U.O. It’s very clear: it’s the “Kitchen Show,” because... what’s the word you used before? Hazy? It was hazy for a long time because I felt that everything had been done. So I felt very depressed about that. Whenever I had an idea, I felt that someone already had it, and then I rejected it. That went on for years. It was really difficult. I was just searching. I think the night train journeys were my migrating and learning years. I remember I was on a train after Harald Szeeman had just done Documenta, the biggest art show in the world, and returned to his hometown of Bern, Switzerland, and organized an exhibition in his apartment. And so, I realized that maybe you don’t have to look that far... maybe you could just do it in your home. L.K.J. There is a great sense of selflessness coming across, whether it be doing an autobiography to inspire others or the handwriting project, which connects and preserves people, ideas, and cultures. H.U.O. Yes. I see my practice as an enabling practice and a catalyst activity. But it’s also because the word curating may not cover my entire practice. It has become a rather widely used term. L.K.J. Yes, it’s colloquially used in quite a misleading sense. People tend to associate it with rigidity and the imposition of order. But, of course, with order, you always need to have the space for chance, play, and the unexpected. H.U.O. Exactly. For example, in France, it’s even more like what you described. One is called a “commissar” there. That’s almost like policing—I’ve never been comfortable with that. I always try to organize the conditions for chance to arrive. I spoke to J.G. Ballard about this when I interviewed him. He said it’s very simple: what you do is junction making, whether it be between objects, non-objects, people—anything. And I think this Ballardian notion is rather fitting. L.K.J. Finally, part of your morning ritual is reading the works of the French-Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant for fifteen minutes. If you could give the works of one writer to every artist, who would it be? H.U.O. I would still recommend Glissant. There are so many toolboxes in Glissant. It’s the right to opacity, the archipelago, it’s mondialité, it’s creolization, and the idea of inventing one’s own institution. It’s the concrete utopia, the “trembling utopia,” as he called it, of connecting our cultures to our other cultures worldwide. I would also still say Etel Adnan, one of the few writers I’ve read every single line of. And Robert Walser. Then, most recently, I’ve been very inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and I would recommend her book “Dub,” which is a book about legacy. One may be inspired by XYZ, but inspirations can also work with you. The book shows us that inspiration is not necessarily genealogical. ●

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