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Conversation with Philip Ursprung

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## INTERVIEW

# “Curiosity Is the Motor of the Entire Interview Project”: Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation with Philip Ursprung

*Philip Ursprung*

**Philip Ursprung:** How do you prepare an interview?

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** With artists, my interviews are mostly based on years of dialogue, years of—as Maurice Blanchot would say—“infinite conversation.” If I am interviewing people from fields such as science, literature, music, or architecture, then the interview implies a kind of crash course, since I have to read a lot before I meet them. The German museum director Alexander Dorner, one of the leading figures of early twentieth-century curating, inspired me with his idea that to understand the forces effective within the visual arts, it’s important to understand what’s happening in the other disciplines. For instance, after many artists had told me how important fractals were to them, I went to see Benoît Mandelbrot; after artists told me about the importance of LSD and Albert Hofmann, I went to see Hofmann; and after several artists talked about the importance of WikiLeaks, I interviewed Julian Assange last week. I had questions, which came from artists such as Paul Chan, Martha Rosler, and Goldin+Senneby, so it became a kind of an interview within an interview.

**Ursprung:** Why do you do interviews?

**Obrist:** At the university, one is disciplined in reading. Later in life, the more institutional responsibility one has, the less time one has to read. My approach to interviews, particularly as they relate to fields other than my own, is probably motivated by the desire to remain a student eager to learn. Every time I go to see a scientist or an architect I try to read everything they have written, as if I were preparing for a seminar. This allows me to maintain the reading discipline. It satisfies my appetite to learn. Curiosity is the motor of the entire interview project.

**Ursprung:** Do you have a repertoire of questions?

**Obrist:** I have a large catalog of questions, which has issued from many interviews. I always keep the questions from interviews and I add them to my archive.

**Ursprung:** Is this catalog of questions virtual or do you actually have it with you?

**Obrist:** Both. During an interview, I can’t look into my computer or into my BlackBerry. Often I go to the interview with a pile of paper and then pull a question from my notes. I never ask questions in a given order, but I have a sort of cluster on a sheet of paper. I start at some point and then—

according to the answer I get—continue at another point. The interview is thus half planned, half by chance.

**Ursprung:** Does the desire to be an eternal student have something to do with your training? Are you an autodidact?

**Obrist:** As a teenager, starting in 1984, 1985, I visited artists such as Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Christian Boltanski, Gerhard Richter, and Alighiero Boetti and had long conversations with them. But I didn’t record the conversations. During these years I acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of art, I made my own grand tour, so to speak. I had read Carl Seelig’s book *Wanderungen mit Robert Walser* and started to be a wanderer, or flaneur, myself. This phase lasted about five years, and if there is a master plan within the whole interview project, it is my desire to be a flaneur. At that time it was possible to travel in night trains through Europe without much money.

**Ursprung:** You studied economy and social sciences for a brief time. Do you have a degree?

**Obrist:** I studied at the University of St. Gallen [St. Gall] in the late 1980s. My umbilical cord was the obsession for art. But I decided not to study art history because I wanted to enlarge the field and understand the world. My interest was always pluridisciplinary. I had very interesting professors, such as Hans-Christoph Binswanger, who taught ecology and economy, Ota Šik, the former deputy prime minister of Czechoslovakia, who was a theorist of the “third way” between capitalism and communism, and Armin Wildermuth, who taught philosophy. After studying three years in St. Gallen, I was invited to teach at the University of Lüneburg and then appointed to teach at the Università IUAV di Venezia.

**Ursprung:** You curated your first exhibitions while still studying?

**Obrist:** Yes, once my grand tour was finished, I did the *Kitchen Show* in St. Gallen in 1991, a show with Christian Boltanski in the St. Gallen Monastery in 1992, and a show with Gerhard Richter at the Nietzsche House in Sils in 1992.

**Ursprung:** You went a long way before you actually got in touch with art history.

**Obrist:** I got in touch with architecture through collaboration with the curator Kasper König, who had dealt with architecture in his exhibitions *Westkunst* (1981) and *Von hier*

aus (1984). Through König and the architecture department of the Städelschule in Frankfurt, I met Dan Graham, Dara Birnbaum, and Peter Cook. After an art journal had written about my work as curator, Hubert Burda and Christa Maar invited me to become a member of their Burda Academy of the Third Millennium. That was the moment when I got in touch with science. At some point I realized that literature was missing, and soon I realized that art history was missing. I had started to connect to all these other fields outside of art, but I had never really connected to art history. This led to *Utopia Station*, which I curated together with the art historian Molly Nesbit and the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija at the Fiftieth Venice Biennale in 2003.

**Ursprung:** So your main teachers were curators?

**Obrist:** I really did learn my job on the job. I am a curator who thrives on producing curatorial reality, exhibitions. In this field it is not unusual that you learn on the job. Kasper König came from anthropology and learned curating with Pontus Hultén. I learned it from my mentor König and from Suzanne Pagé. In my book *Brief History of Curating*<sup>1</sup> I tried to sort of summarize all my “grandparents” in terms of curating. Many of these curators don’t have a background in art history.

**Ursprung:** How do you record your interviews?

**Obrist:** The conversations that took place between 1984 and 1991 were not taped. They are lost. Then I started to use microcassettes. And since the early 1990s I use a camera. I sat in a café with Jonas Mekas in Paris in the early 1990s and he had this camera and asked, “Hans Ulrich, why don’t you film your interviews?” So I just bought a little camera and the format shifted from the audiocassettes to mini-DVs. Today, I’ve got about 2,200 hours of mini-DV tapes, and all interviews are filmed.

**Ursprung:** What are the languages of the interviews?

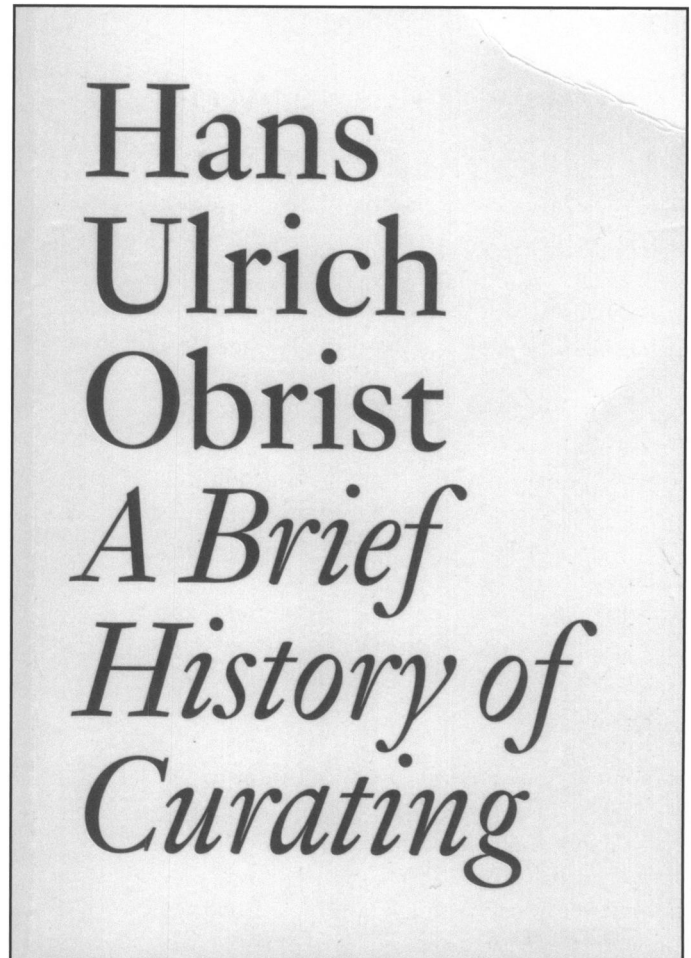
**Obrist:** I grew up in Switzerland, surrounded by mountains. I couldn’t see the sea and there were no big cities, either. As I need big cities, I always knew that I had to spend time abroad, even though I love Switzerland. I learned Spanish and Russian and French and English and Italian between twelve and eighteen in order to get ready to travel. The interviews are recorded in all those different languages.

**Ursprung:** You do interviews in Russian?

**Obrist:** Russian is the language I understand 50 percent; I need a translator later who helps me. There are maybe five, six interviews in Russian. I’m fluent in Spanish, in Italian, in French, in English, and in German. Most of the interviews are in these five languages.

**Ursprung:** Do you make transcriptions yourself?

**Obrist:** I work with transcribers from various languages who work regularly with me, for example, Lynne Price, a theologian from Birmingham, who did transcriptions for about



Cover of Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, ed. Lionel Bovier and Birte Theiler, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2010 (photograph provided by Hans Ulrich Obrist)

twelve years until her retirement. A good transcription is key to the interview. If the transcription isn’t good, the DNA is wrong and you never get it straight. To find people who really do great transcriptions is an essential part of the process. Once they’ve transcribed the interview, they send it to me. Then I edit the transcript, the interviewee corrects it, and so on.

**Ursprung:** The editing process changes most interviews substantially. What about the tapes? These data are interesting for historians because they are a nonedited primary source. What is the status of the original interviews? Do you archive them? Is there a plan to deal with them in a different way than the edited material? Or are they just steps in the process, which are left behind?

**Obrist:** That is a very interesting question, and it’s still not solved. All of this produces a huge amount of archival material. For the moment it has only been used for books, not as an archive. The archive as such is my flat. But your question is important because in the long run these sources are at least as interesting as the published texts.

**Ursprung:** Are your interviews always made in view of catalogs, for a specific purpose?



Cover of Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviste*, vol. 1, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2003 (photograph provided by Hans Ulrich Obrist)

**Obrist:** I rarely do the interviews for anybody other than myself. It is research. At a certain moment it felt interesting to share interviews with the reader. There were suggestions from others about what I could do with them. The publisher Fondazione Pitti Imagine and Francesco Bonami and Charta suggested a one-thousand-page collection, a book that would show the breadth and the encyclopedic range of the project.<sup>2</sup> Walther König had the idea that we could emphasize one other aspect of my interviews, namely, that they're not only horizontal but also vertical. By vertical, he means that I speak to the same artists again and again, over years. At present, this series contains twenty-five volumes, from Robert Crumb to Dan Graham and Kazuyo Sejima.

**Ursprung:** What is the role of the interview project in your curatorial practice?

**Obrist:** The interview project is not my main activity. It is my garden, so to speak, a terrain where I cultivate ideas. In a way, it is the other side of curating. When I started to work with Kasper König in the early 1990s, my curatorial work suddenly became very exposed—it moved from the space of my kitchen to an international arena. When everything one does is entering the public realm, it can literally cause a sunburn.

Therefore it's important to have a research project, where things can grow and don't have to become public immediately. Many of my exhibitions are developed in this garden, but it is not necessary to publish all the interviews immediately. I just do my interviews. Almost daily, two or three interviews a week, so I don't really have the time to think about what to do with them.

**Ursprung:** Well, at the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2010 your interview project was part of the exhibition and the interviews therefore became an object of the exhibition itself.

**Obrist:** Kazuyo Sejima, the director of the Biennale, had the idea to present my videos at the Biennale. It was an experiment, curated by Karen Marta and Bettina Korek of the Institute of the 21st Century. By interviewing all the participants it turned into a kind of portrait of the Biennale, a portrait of an exhibition. And it was convenient to do it in the architecture world because if I would have done it in the art world, then some people would have thought that I aspired to be an artist, which is not my intention. Obviously this isn't art, it's just a form of document.

**Ursprung:** There is an important shift in your career as a curator, which I localize with your exhibition *Cities on the Move* in the Secession in Vienna (1997).<sup>3</sup> When I saw the show I thought that you were moving from the safe realm of the art world and your early site-specific exhibitions to a completely new field. I also felt that this was the end of the tradition of the authored exhibition, because the subject is too complex for one curator alone. I felt that the paradigm of Harald Szeemann ended and a new paradigm was beginning, one that is much more dependent on collaboration. Of course, you remain the curator, and you even personify the project. But the exhibition is not about the microcosm in your head any more. Could one say that the interviews come into play at that moment, almost like another form or a substitute for the disappearing curator-author? Or are these interviews a symptom of a more general shift, namely, the shift from curating objects to curating discourses?

**Obrist:** It could be, yes. During this time the interviews certainly became much more important in my work. The beginning of the recorded interview project was closely related to the project of the Museum in Progress initiated by the late Josef Ortner. In the mid-1990s, Ortner invited me to interview Félix González-Torres and Vito Acconci. Félix González-Torres told me how much better it would have been in a café than in a TV studio. One could just film the conversation without the makeup, the masquerade, and the tension of a television studio.

**Ursprung:** Wasn't this your first exhibition about a non-Western subject?

**Obrist:** Yes, the exhibition went beyond the Western paradigm. Today, we are used to the fact that the art world is polyphonic. But twenty years ago when you and I entered the world of art and architecture, these were closed. They existed mainly between Europe and the United States and some



*Cities on the Move*, exhibition view, Secession, Vienna, 1997, curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist (photograph by Kenneth Anger, provided by Hans Ulrich Obrist)

small venues in Latin America and Japan. This has changed over the last twenty years. As Fernand Braudel says, there are these seismic shifts in the long duration. I think one day we are going to look back to our time and it's going to seem crucial that this shift has happened. I have just been to Bogotá, where the art scene is blossoming. It feels like Glasgow 1990. When we did *Cities on the Move*, it was not a Western curator bringing the East to the West, but a collaboration between a Chinese curator, Hou Hanru, and myself. I entered a new context and met lots of different artists and architects I didn't know. I guess it was then that the interview project suddenly became a kind of mapping. You're right. I never thought about it but it's true, something has changed around 1996, 1997. At that moment, I started to do many, many more interviews. Before that I did an interview once a month for a catalog. But when we went to Asia, I was always with my little camera. After my first trip with Hou Hanru I came home with forty-eight mini-DV cassettes.

**Ursprung:** What about the curatorial collaboration?

**Obrist:** Of course, self-organization started to play a big role, as we had the idea to bring into the show some temporary, autonomous self-organized zones. And the concept of mapping also became crucial. We wanted to map the change and urban mutation taking place at that time. Therefore, both the exhibition and the interview project are part of this mapping

of the shift in Braudel's sense. We did not have an a priori idea. We didn't just plan an exhibition about a city and then try to find artists who worked there. Our approach was rather inductive. We met the people, saw the works, and this led us to the topic of the urban. The exhibition concept was a kind of autopoiesis in the sense of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Also, the exhibition produced an archive, so to speak.

**Ursprung:** So the exhibition was intertwined with the interviews?

**Obrist:** Each exhibition I do produces new interviews, and the interviews again lead to new exhibitions. Sometimes I really cannot tell what is first. For instance, as a student I encountered Cy Twombly, and we talked about literature. After years of conversations with Dominique Gonzales-Foerster or Tacita Dean about literature, my exhibition *Everstill* in the Casa Museo Federico García Lorca in Granada (2007) was born. That's why I think conversations are productions of reality. They are not conversations for conversations' sake.

**Ursprung:** As in our present-day economy, so in curating, the production of physical objects has become less important than the distribution of projects. The arrangement of artifacts, the spatial organization of exhibitions become less effective than the arrangement of discourse in space and

time. I therefore see your interview project less as a “garden” but more as your most vivid field of activity, as if the exhibitions become a by-product of the conversations.

**Obrist:** I don’t think that the exhibition is only about discourse and that the physical type of exhibition disappears. It’s just another layer of some sort. Obviously, a lot has changed in terms of exhibitions. While curators originally were the caretakers of objects, in the twentieth century they became more and more involved with the artists, considering the exhibition as a medium. In the late 1960s the aspect of materiality was questioned and ever since, exhibitions are also mainly intersubjective—think of Tino Sehgal. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that the previous states have disappeared. There is still amazing work with painting and sculpture.

**Ursprung:** But the dialogues play a crucial part in today’s catalogs, they are more important than the introduction or the survey text. The artists, so it seems, have to be present not so much by statements but in a conversation with a curator. And this is a new phenomenon, unknown in the 1960s or 1970s.

**Obrist:** There is a long tradition of artists’ writings. I just read Edgar Degas’s collected writings, and last week I read Kandinsky’s collected writings. I cannot get enough of artists’ writings. I am obsessed with long interviews such as Pierre Cabanne’s interviews with Marcel Duchamp and, of course, Francis Bacon’s conversations with David Sylvester.<sup>4</sup> It wasn’t easy for Bacon to talk about his work. But through a lifelong friendship with Sylvester, it became possible. The Bacon-Sylvester book has always been my model. My biggest aim is to one day produce a book with that level of intensity. All my interview books are sketches toward that aim. That is my unrealized project, and I suppose it probably takes thirty, forty years of being friends with an artist to get to that point of trust and intensity. My project is not only about a discussion with the same artists again and again. It’s also about inventing new rules of the game in order to make interviews productive. I have a lot of interviews with artists in museums; I have interviews with artists in taxis. Yesterday I was with Anri Sala, who wants to do an interview with me horse riding.

**Ursprung:** Nevertheless, I would argue that the interview is absorbing theory, that the dialogue is overcoming the historical and critical essay, perhaps because one tries to keep the art discourse in a state of openness where meaning is not fixed but constantly renegotiated. Isn’t this the end of art critique in the traditional sense of a neutral judgment about art?

**Obrist:** When I joined Serpentine as codirector with Julia Peyton-Jones in 2006, we defined a catalog format together with Walther König in which we have critical essays as well as the voice of the artists. There are now twenty such catalogs. The interview will never replace a critical essay, and I find it essential that we always commission one or two texts per catalog. For instance, in the Richard Hamilton catalog there are two essays, one by Benjamin Buchloh and one by Michael Bracewell.<sup>5</sup> I also believe that there should be more grants for writers, that the art world needs to support writing, not just by

commissioning texts for catalogs. In addition to the essays, we actually often include the voice of the artist, either in an interview—when artists don’t write—or with their own writing, if they do write.

**Ursprung:** What about the relation between your voice as curator and the artist’s voice?

**Obrist:** I’ve never believed that the curator imposes his voice on the art. I’ve always believed that the curator is a medium. The curator exists to get the artist’s voice out there. This leads to the question of authorship. Félix Fénéon said in the early twentieth century that the curator builds “passerelles” [footbridges]. And my mentor Suzanne Pagé says that the curator is somebody who facilitates, who enables the work of the artists. I have a very artist-centered view because everything I’ve ever done comes out of the dialogue with artists.

**Ursprung:** This is the traditional sense of the Latin word *curare*, to “take care of.” On the other hand, as curator you choose who is exhibited and you decide who speaks. And this leads us to the issue of the artistic canon. How do you deal with this canon?

**Obrist:** Your question leads to Rem Koolhaas’s preface for my collection of forewords, entitled *dontstopdontstopdontstopdontstop*.<sup>6</sup> Koolhaas starts with the idea that I had to leave my native country because my speech was too fast for the Swiss. Then he goes into this idea that curating is a profession about thumbs up or down, the curator being the judge. Curators prepare new talents for their debut and send those same talents off the stage when they have exhausted our attention. I avoid doing this, because I believe in long-term relationships with artists and long-term relationships with exhibitions. That’s why exhibitions such as *Do It*, *Cities on the Move*, or now, *Indian Highway*, tour over five, ten years and grow. According to Koolhaas, the interview project reacts against the curatorial stranglehold. In his view, the interviewer in me is the flip side of the curator. While the former is promiscuous and curious to explore the other’s mind “unedited and unexpurgated,” the latter is “selective and exclusive.”

**Ursprung:** So how does your curating differ from a more traditional kind of curating?

**Obrist:** My shows continue to evolve and they change, even after the opening. So from that point of view, it is almost like Nicolas Roeg’s relationship to the movie script. Roeg says that he only had a sheet of paper to prepare his groundbreaking movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Very often my exhibitions don’t have a scenario of dozens of pages because I think that would kill them.

**Ursprung:** There is no real plan?

**Obrist:** There is a plan but an open plan. That’s why Cedric Price is so important for me. At a certain moment I came across Price and Yona Friedman and Oskar Hansen and Constant and Giancarlo De Carlo and had lots of conversations with them about them questioning their master plans.

So the idea of all these architects and urbanists actually questioning the master plan became liberating for me because I saw the potential of this for the realm of curating. As curators, we can start to address the postplanning condition.

**Ursprung:** Did this start with *Cities on the Move*?

**Obrist:** Actually it started a year earlier, with *Life/Live* at the Musée d'Art Moderne with Suzanne Pagé. When we did *Life/Live* I looked at a lot and listened a lot and I realized that the English art scene was very inspired and fueled by artist-run spaces. Therefore, we decided to do an exhibition within the exhibition and to give space to these artist-run spaces. We didn't even know what they did until the day of the opening. It was a fantastic adventure.

**Ursprung:** You have much sympathy for architects like Cedric Price, who were almost forgotten for a long time. I interpret your sympathy as a longing for the playfulness and coherence of a pre-1970s art world not yet curated. Do you have two curator souls?

**Obrist:** There's a lot of this oxymoron in my activity, I suppose. And I think that's why I've always been so attracted to the work of Gerhard Richter, who is on the one hand an unbelievably contemporary artist and on the other hand a classical artist. He is a figurative and an abstract painter. There is an ambiguity in his work related to his aim to control and his capacity to let things happen. His abstract paintings are sort of "controlled chance." These issues interest me in relation to curating. I try to be contemporary, to work with emerging artists, to give them their very first show, and yet also to work with the past. That's the other thing Rem Koolhaas touched upon and which is also a crucial aspect of the interview project. He describes an omnivorous attention to what is out-of-date, to what is forgotten, to what is deeply unfashionable. He says that has something to do with a "quality of justice, never of judgment." Maybe oblivion or amnesia is at the core of our digital age. Just because we have more information doesn't mean that we have more memory. The "protest against forgetting" is a central part of the interview project. I do a lot of interviews with very old practitioners. I was at a certain moment interested in finding out where my profession comes from and to meet all these ancestors. Everybody thinks that curating started with Harald Szeemann, but there are also Jean Leering, Seth Siegelau, Walter Zanini, Johannes Cladders, Lucy Lippard, Walter Hopps, Pontus Hultén, and so on. And you know the same thing is true for artists. When I go to a city, I tend to ask, Who is the Louise Bourgeois of this city? The interview project, like my curatorial project, is very much a collaboratorium. It's not only me sitting alone in a room and thinking, "Whom could I interview next?" In the meanwhile, there's a whole network of friends who help me think.

**Ursprung:** Like the idea of you asking questions for other people when you go there . . .

**Obrist:** Yes! The interview practice is promiscuous. "Two is company, three is a crowd." The dialogue has become im-

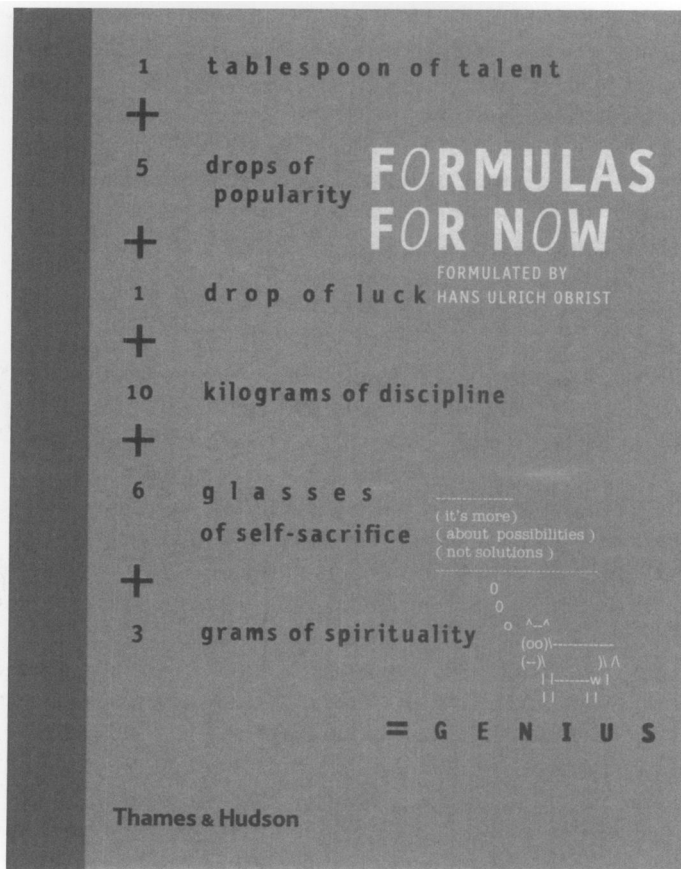
portant. Rosemarie Trockel once took me aside and said that it was important for my interview project to put the emphasis on very old people. She suggested that I do a book of centenarians because nobody went to see these very old people, such as Nathalie Sarraute. Peter Fischli and David Weiss encouraged me to see Paul Parin, the ethnopschoanalyst in Zurich. In the meantime, I have maybe forty interviews with very old people.

**Ursprung:** How do you classify your interviews?

**Obrist:** There are classifications according to geography, such as my book with China, which reads like a diary.<sup>7</sup> Currently, we're preparing a similar book with India about my whole ever-increasing relationship to India. There are the long-term interviews in the series of Walther König. Then there are thematic collections, such as the interviews with curators.<sup>8</sup> We're now working on a brief history of sound, all of the interviews I did with sonic pioneers, from Stockhausen to Xenakis. We could have a brief history of science, a brief history of architecture, and so on. Then there are the marathons, which came out of chance. I was invited to do something for a theater festival in 2005 in Stuttgart. It started with the idea to do a portrait of a city through interviews. Another marathon happened in London in 2006 in the Serpentine Pavilion with Rem Koolhaas. These marathons are complex, dynamic systems with many feedback loops. Besides the portrait marathons, there have been manifesto marathons and those which function like a mapping device, such as the one we've done in India last week. I'm now going to do one in Rio, which will lead to another marathon book.

**Ursprung:** Rem Koolhaas observed that the economy changes so rapidly that architecture becomes too slow to react. This is why he founded the think tank AMO in 1995, as part of his office OMA. I am interested in the parallel to your own practice. Does the interview project appear when the spatial curating becomes too slow or too rudimentary to map the change that's happening?

**Obrist:** This is a very important aspect. You mentioned the idea of collaboration. I am codirecting the Serpentine with Julia Peyton-Jones. We don't necessarily need *one* museum director. It's much more fun to do it together. As Julia says, "One plus one is eleven!" We've talked about self-organization and automatism: very often my projects have something to do with automatism, obviously *controlled* automatism, as in the case of the formula book, where I've asked a hundred artists to submit a formula.<sup>9</sup> The project did not start with the intention to work on the issue of formula and then get everybody to illustrate my ideas. It's my job to find out what motivates artists. It actually started when Samuel Keller and I had the idea to interview Albert Hofmann. He was almost a hundred years old. In the cafeteria where we prepared the interview during Art Basel, Hofmann did a doodle of the formula of LSD. I asked him if we could scan it. He gave us the napkin, we scanned it and I sent it to a few artist friends. I didn't really have any idea what we should do with it, I just admired how this man's whole life work got synthesized in this beautiful little drawing. The artists started mailing me



Cover of Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Formulas for Now*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2008 (photograph provided by Hans Ulrich Obrist)

their own formulas and my office wall became filled with formulas. One day John Brockman and Brian Eno visited my office. Brockman decided to present the issue at the Edge Community. Soon we had more than a hundred scientists, from Richard Dawkins to Freeman Dyson, doing formulas as well. At that point it wouldn't even fit into my office anymore, so we needed a book. There had been no plan, it just happened. Each time such a project happens, it produces a community. It does not merely show existing communities but it actually produces communities. That's part of the marathon, that's part of my exhibitions, that's part of all of it.

**Ursprung:** To build communities on a global scale is difficult, since everybody is constantly on the move . . .

**Obrist:** Yes, and everybody is also very busy in their specialized field. That's why I think it's interesting to find out how to do "salons" again for the twenty-first century.

**Ursprung:** Your projects usually lead to books. Your work always turns on the archive, the library. Why are books so essential for your practice?

**Obrist:** The first reason is that most artists are fond of books. I remember one of my first visits, as a teenager, to Gilbert & George. They not only told me about their concept of "Art for all," which became very important for me. But they also told me that their works of art in collections might be on view

only rarely, whereas books are always available. That is why they wanted to be in control of their books, such as *Side by Side* or *Dark Shadow*, and to design them themselves. There is an interesting new installation at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, done by Kathy Halbreich and Christophe Cherix, featuring Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* book, which rightly claims it as an important artwork of the twentieth century. It's an instruction book, it has inspired my *Do It* project and it has inspired many other artists. It is as important as a painting or a sculpture or a video. Books are not a secondary product. They are not *about* exhibitions, they are extensions of exhibitions. My early catalogs, for instance, *World Soup* for the *Kitchen Show*,<sup>10</sup> are artist books, mobile exhibitions in the sense of Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*.

The second reason has to do with my practice. I've curated about 250 shows now. But my principle is that I am only as good as my next show. This goes for curating in general. One of the things that remain from the curatorial activity is the books, particularly because exhibitions are not collected. The third reason is difficult to rationalize, it's just my personal addiction. I have no other addiction now that I don't even drink coffee anymore. It's just an addiction for books. I buy books every day. It's a ritual. I need to buy a book every day and so I've got about forty or fifty thousand books in my Berlin flat, in my London flat, in my parents' flat in Switzerland. And the practice of buying books and looking at books also leads to producing books. Books lead to other books and the idea is that one day there could be an archive to bring it all together in one place. This leads to the idea of the institute where one could have all the interviews and all the books in one place and make them available. I'm not a collector of interviews; I'm not a collector of books. I want them to be useful. I want everything to be a utility in the service of art.

**Ursprung:** You made a loan of your archive to the University of Lüneburg some years ago.

**Obrist:** I want the archive to become *ad usum*, as Pierre Klossowski said. We found an intermediate solution when it went as a long-term loan to the University of Lüneburg. Guided by Hans-Peter Feldmann and Christian Boltanski, two artists who have actually worked a lot with archives, the students analyzed my archive. Feldmann proposed various, unusual categories to classify the books, according to colors, according to weight, according to smell, according to size. We made a mapping of different archives of the 1990s and connected my archive to other archives by curators and artists in a book entitled *Interarchive*.<sup>11</sup> The problem is that archives are generally not made productive during their lifetime. They become cemeteries. That's my other unrealized project: to have my own archive concentrated in one place. And the model for this is the Library of Aby Warburg in Hamburg, before he had to emigrate. I love that idea, and that Warburg equipped the library with machinery and conveyer belts to make it really useful. Obviously, the digital plays a big part in organizing an archive today. The Donald Judd Library is a good model because you can virtually browse the bookshelves. I could imagine that something of that sort could happen with the archive in the long run. It's a question of



finding the right partner. My archive is in the middle of its activities right now, and it could be very productive in connection with an institution.

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## Notes

The text was based on an interview conducted in London on March 7, 2011, transcribed by Kristina Hinrichsen.

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