The Master Interviewer

Introduction

By

Karen Marta

Twenty or so years ago, when I first met Hans Ulrich Obrist (whom I always think of as HUO) in Zurich, he reminded me of Rimbaud. Not only because he was roughly the teenage poet’s age when he and I met, but also because I felt he was making a new form of poetry, of art.

In time, I came to see how true my feeling was. I was amazed that this very young man, without funding and without institutional support or commissions from art publications, had set out on his own to record what he feared would one day vanish or be forgotten in the greater, more seemingly relevant cultural dialogue of the moment.

His interviews were and remain his divine passion: He has done more than 2,250 of them since he began. Little has changed in HUO’s mission and his way of getting to the core of the person being interviewed—except that he now interweaves this passion with his full-time curatorial work.

Novelist Douglas Coupland wrote in his introduction to Interviews: Volume 2: “We could have done one interview together, and I’d never have to do another interview again. I’d simply send people a photocopy of our interview and declare, ‘It doesn’t get any better than this. Learn from the master.’”

In earlier days, HUO sped from city to city in Europe on trains and dwelled in their stations, whereas now the circumference of his interviews has widened globally. Planes and airports are his hosts. How many actual hours is he ever on terra firma?

Rimbaud transformed his genre, upending the conventions of its meter and rhyme; HUO has reconfigured the genre of the interview, distilling and transforming the informational mass of prose, with its disparate themes and motifs—and the usual who, what, when, where, why, and how—into artifact, a poem of idea and emotion. His interviews, like poems, focus and synthesize thought into points of energy and beauty.

Turning an interview into a poem would be an interesting achievement in itself. A book of such interviews would be like an anthology of works by poets with varying interests. But the aggregate, the sheer volume and international scope of the interviews HUO has done over the past two decades, gathers the individual voices—the individual poems—into a master poem, not one rooted in a single nation or heritage, but a vital global epic. It is a unified and unifying poem with a memory of the past, which is our present inheritance and cultural legacy for the future.

Perhaps his rush to travel and his urgency to do more and more interviews in recent years can be explained by HUO’s desire to preserve traces of intelligence from past decades, testimonies of those who have not yet been recorded and whose memories might fall undeservedly into oblivion. The fruits of his desire to preserve are evident in his many hours of interviews with the visionary architect Cedric Price and the many visits to Japan with Rem Koolhaas to document the aging Metabolism architects, whose important voices would otherwise have been lost.

People die, voices fade, but so too does the very material—the tapes—on which those voices have found sanctuary. Tapes, such as the ones HUO used in his interviews years ago and still sometimes uses, disintegrate. And soon they will be as mute and dead as many of the people whose voices they have held in their fragile keep. These voices are not just historical documents, but have embedded within them a host of proposals for what HUO has referred to as “lost projects, poetic utopian dream constructs, partially realized projects, censored projects.” Are these dreams part of our future inheritance? HUO himself has the dream to one day curate a large-scale exhibition of unrealized projects. Preservation of his interviews on tapes, the mandate of the Institute of the 21st Century, is a hedge against an amnesiac future: The conversations bear seeds waiting for the opportunity to flower one day. The tapes are a strained, delicate net holding—for who knows how long—otherwise lost past, which is to say, our future.

A version of this essay appeared in the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale catalogue.
Hans Ulrich Obrist

Few have mastered the art of conversation better than Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions and programs and director of international projects at London’s Serpentine Gallery, who, through his ongoing Interview Project, has recorded some 20,000 hours of his discussions with notable cultural figures. How, then, does one interview an ace interviewer? Swayface tapped Paul Holdengräber, director of the public-talks series Live From The NYPL, for the engagement. He, like Obrist, has interviewed hundreds of personalities from numerous professions and walks of life; guests at the forum have included Patti Smith, Anish Kapoor, and Mike Tyson. Holdengräber spoke with Obrist about the curator’s early influences, his current projects, and the concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, a work that integrates and unifies all forms of art—or at least attempts to. The comprehensive nature of such a work ultimately makes it an unrelenting ideal, something to perpetually strive for but never complete, which is precisely the quality that makes it interesting to Obrist. Indeed, many of the curator’s undertakings—his Interview Project, his “Do It” exhibition, and the Serpentine Marathon series, to name a few—are works perpetually in progress; they’re always being added to, reinvented, and remade.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: It’s interesting that there is this connection between curating and curiosity. It goes back to my childhood. My parents, when I was 5 or 6 years old, took me to the library of the Abbey of Saint Gall, one of the great medieval monasteries of the world. It burnt down and then was rebuilt, and it became this fabulous Rococo library. It made a huge impression on me: this display, this time capsule, where one could look at these books only with white gloves on. Later, when I was 7, 8, and 9, my parents kept going back to it. This was before I ever saw art. I realized little by little that these monks were bringing all this together, that was the beginning of something.

PH: That says something about you, I think. That you have had a voracious, all-consuming appetite. Dorothy Parker’s line would fit perfectly for you: “The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.” Talk to me about curiosity and the fact that there may be no cure for it, except perhaps curation or just talking constantly.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: That’s exactly what it was. My ignorance of art developed into this magnetic, almost addictive eternal return. I went back every afternoon when there wasn’t school to look and look and look again. It was like a school of seeing. It was a very lucky situation, because I think a city without a museum is a dead city. I really think that a dynamic museum—a museum as a laboratory—is as important as a great school in a city. The Kunsthalle in Zurich, at that time, with the visionary curator Harald Szeemann, became my school. I learned much more there than in any other school. I visited his “Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk” exhibition 41 times as a teenager.

PH: How do you recall that it was 41?

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Hans Ulrich Obrist: I didn’t grow up at all in the context of museums, and I didn’t grow up at all in the context of the arts. The only place that my parents took me to was a kind of museum that was a monastery library. Then, at a certain moment, being completely ignorant about art, I came across a sculpture by Giacometti at the Kunsthalle in Zurich. That had such a magnetic impact on me that from then on I started to go to museums every day.

PH: How do you think of the Talmudic idea that there are 40 layers of meaning, and that in some way you had to go back again and again to see, see, see, look, look, look. It reminds me of what Werner Herzog tells his students when they want to learn about film. He says, “Read, read, read, read, read!”

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PH: Let’s go back to those early years. You mentioned you were 3 or 4 years old when your parents took you to that monas-
terum. It was kind of a wunderkammer. Is that correct?
HUO: I remember that one had to wear felt shoes. There was this silent walking through the space.

HUO: I suppose early childhood experiences with books had to do with discovering the world and trying to bring different forms of knowledge together.

PH: Books have mattered to you greatly, both as books written by others and the infinite variety of books you yourself curate or write.

HUO: I’ve always believed that books grow out of other books. There were many things that happened in my childhood in Switzerland that were influential. On my way to high school, when I was 13, 14, 15, 16, there was the house of Ludwig Binswanger, the psycho-

analyst and founder of Daseinsanalyse, who influenced Foucault. I would pass by this house, which was, in my teens, a second home. But I was also in connection to the idea of the atlas, of the encyclo-
pedia, of connected images and how they produce meaning.

I would say the discovery of the writer Robert Walser was another important aspect of my childhood.

PH: It’s interesting, because with Walser, you mention someone who spent so many years in a sanatorium.

HUO: Yes. As a student, I founded a museum in homage to him. He always passed on his walk at a restaurant, and in this restaurant I installed a vitrine. I invited artists to exhibit in it, and we declared it the Museum of Robert Walser. I saw that we could create a museum every day—the museum is a daily practice of invention. After the vitrine in the restaurant, there started to be some articles, and people from far away came to visit it. But it was just a vitrine—there really wasn’t a Museum of Robert Walser. It was just my student museum.

HUO: That’s why I’m so curious to hear from you, I was recently at the Serpentine Gallery, in conversation with British essayist and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. It was a wunderbar experience. We open the conversation with a question: Why Read the Classics?

PH: What is so interesting here is that, on the one hand, there are those very early childhood memories—the felt shoes, the preciousness of the museum, the fact that one had to prepare oneself physically, in one’s accoutrement, to receive the beauty of that monastic library—and on the other hand, there’s something very quo-
tidian, something of the café culture, one might say, where a museum can exist any-
where, where there are no special shoes that are needed. In a way, you’re oscillating between those two worlds, one of them a world that’s confined and restricted, the other one much more in daily life.

HUO: It went from the library and the books to the experience with works. In some way, I think, it’s never finished. It’s inexhaustible. The same two walks in the forest are never the same. It’s a voyage of discovery each time.

PH: What’s the difference between walk-
ning and talking and walking and thinking?

HUO: Two readings are never the same, and two walks in the forest are never the same either. It’s an infinity of possibilities. It’s also the idea that it’s never finished. It’s inexhaustible. The same thing is true for a walk. You can always walk again on a mountain or re-walk through the forest. That’s the whole Walser Walser idea.

PH: For me, this notion of reading and re-reading is so important. Thanks to you, I was recently at the Serpentine Gallery, in conversation with British essayist and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. Psychoanalytical sessions are really a form of re-reading. They’re re-reading one’s past, going over things, trying to figure them out by closely examining them again and again. A successful analysis offers us a reading of ourselves.

HUO: It’s on a level with the ancient talis-
man, and that leads us to the idea of the “total book” as Malmud conceived it. For me, it went from that to the total work of art, the gesamtkunstwerk. The early Richard Wagner designed the gesamtkunstwerk in a very participatory, open way—more as

Malmud would have understood it—whereas the later Wagner became very overwhelming and oppressive. It’s more that early Wagnerian idea of the gesamtkunstwerk, which Steinhauer followed up with Rudolf Steiner, with Gaudi, with Joseph Beuys. As a kid, I heard this inter-

view with Joseph Beuys, in which he talked about an expanded notion of art. It was incred-

ibly catalytic or catalytic—

PH: I like catalytic. I think that’s very good.

HUO: I was thinking, What would this idea mean for curating? Curating always follows art; it’s not the other way around. I have heard that a curator sets the agenda and an artist follows, but I think it’s the other way around.

As a teenager, I thought about an expanded notion of curating. That was the beginning of my idea that one could curate literature, one could curate a museum, one could curate architecture.

PH: I think we should make a distinction between an interview and a conversation.

PH: Do you think your interviews are part of an unrealizable gesamtkunstwerk?

HUO: I never thought of them as art. I don’t know how it started. With you, I’m very curi-
ous about how your amazing conversations started. But in my case, growing up as a single

child in Switzerland, I had a bit of claustropho-
bos, so I always had the urge to have dialogue. I was looking for these infinite conversations that would never finish.

PH: Yes. It’s unachievable in some way. It’s perpetual, always in motion, and never finished.

HUO: That’s why I’m so curious to hear from you about how your conversations started, because for me, I always had these infinite conversations, but initially they were some-
how not recorded. They were just my research. They’s what brought me to curating. It was always conversations with artists.

PH: Since you ask, I’m just so curi-

ous about people. I approach my sub-
jects—and I wonder if this holds true for you—with the inspiring methodological invita-

tion set forth by the historian Carlo Ginzburg. He states that he approaches and starts his research with what he calls the _“ecphoria of ignorance.” For me, it

started the way I think it starts for us in childhood: by our parents talking to us. We begin our life in conversation with our mother or father or the people who take care of us. We’re very fragile as babies; unlike some other animals, we need care. We need curation as children. I began by simply wanting to par-

ticipate in the conversation, having a mother and father who were Jews who left Vienna just in time and spent the

war years in Haiti and then Mexico. I wanted to talk so much and wanted to understand. When I was 11 years old, my mother said to me, “Just remem-

ber, we have two ears and one mouth.” That, I think, was very fundamental.

Now what I like to do is listen to people. I think you and I share that curiosity. Something happens when you ask people questions. In your case, I asked you a question, and the next thing I knew, there I was, in the middle of Switzerland, imagining the little Hans Ulrich Obrist walking around in shorts, looking at the mountains, feeling lonely, and wanting to talk.

HUO: At a very young age, when I was 16, I had by then visited all museums in Switzerland. I had also started to travel by train and look at museums abroad. This desire grew suddenly to meet the artists. I had seen an exhibition of Fischli/Weiss and rang them up. I said, “I am a pupil, 17 years old, and I’m a very big admirer of your work.” It was obviously an unusual thing for a 17-year-old to do. They were amused by that. They spent an afternoon with me, and said that I should come back next week. That was the day I decided what I wanted to do in life: I wanted to work with artists. I wanted to somehow become a curator.

A few weeks later, I went to see an exhibi-
tion of Gerhard Richter in Bern. I spoke to

him at the opening. I was so completely trans-
formed and transfixed by this exhibition.

PH: You said there was an urgency, a real desire—an appetite—to meet the artists. In the flesh. Do you feel that there were moments of great disappointment?
HUO: No, I think it's always been—what did you call it?—a euphoria of ignorance. There has never been a disappointment.

PH: We read people, we see their work, and then, when we meet the artists or writers—I wonder if this happens for you—they are not quite what you experienced when you were experiencing curating. They allow you to dis destabilize by this public attention. Thomas König, who ran the Städelschule, took me aside and said, “You'll realize what has happened. He said, “You'll never be a disappointment.”

PH: And learning something from them.

HUO: Yes. Curating is about enabling, facilitating, catalyzing, triggering, and helping to produce reality. This 89plus project is bringing us into the future. However, I've always believed that if we want to invent the future, we very often do so through fragments from the past. That means to protect against forgetting, to look back. It's not because we have the Internet that we have more information, that we have more memory.

HUO: Do you think the contrary is true, that we have less memory?

PH: I could be. Amnesia could very well be at the core of the digital age. So many artists work on memory and on protests against forgetting. A few years ago, Rosemarie Trockel, the German artist, whom I met as a teenager, said, “You shouldn't only visit artists of your own time. You should look back.” She had this idea that one should go talk to very, very old people—who have lived a century and have all this knowledge—just before they die. She thought that it would be so wonderful to research and go see them. I took Rosemarie's advice very seriously. Whenever I give a lecture somewhere, I ask, “Is there a Louise Bourgeois in town? Is there an artist, a writer, a philosopher, a pioneer whose work resonates and who has been working for 50 or 100 years?” I've got 30 of these interviews, and certainly one of the most remarkable memories is when I interviewed the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. He was in his house and at a certain moment fell asleep. The phone rang, and he answered, then realized what had happened. He said, “You'll have a great difficulty to transcribe my silence.”

PH: I remember visiting Louise Bourgeois in New York toward the end of her life, wishing to bring her for a public interview to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where I was working at the time. Without hesitation, she responded, “My dear man, I no longer travel in space, only in time.”

I was not aware that you were putting together a collection of people over a certain age. So you have, on the one hand, the 89plus project, and then, on the other hand, a project of people by and over. It's interesting that you're seeking a younger generation to understand. I think we have a lot to gain in knowing how the generations younger than us look things up. I mean, I work in a library: What does it mean to look things up?

Recently, I interviewed the computer scientist and composer Jaron Lanier, the author of Who Owns the Future? In this book, he writes, “I miss the future.” This thought haunts me. I think what he misses in some way is the potentiality of the future as he imagined it. It brings to mind the wonderful line from the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry: “The future's not what it used to be.” As a person who coined the term “virtual reality,” Jaron is left with the slightly foul taste of what virtual reality has brought about in terms of reality. He was more
HUO: I’m always wondering about my work in these parallel realities. My work is obviously very nonlinear. I’m very inspired by these architects who work on 30, 40 construction jobs at one time and have these parallel realities. In terms of curating, I’ve always been, in a similar way, working on all these projects all the time.

PH: Do you sometimes feel it’s too much?

HUO: It’s never been too much, in the sense that they all inspire each other. One comes out of the next. As a curator in the ‘90s, I would travel 366 days a year. At a certain moment, I was at home five days a year.

PH: Only five days?

HUO: Yeah, in the ‘90s. Then, in the 2000s, I decided I wanted to do more sustained work with museums. I wanted to have the possibility to talk to the public about not only global activities, but also local activities. I became the curator of the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and then in 2006 I became co-director of the Serpentine with Julia Peyton-Jones. This has meant that since 2006 I’ve spent most of the week in Paris, and now in London. I’ve continued my research by going on trips all 52 weekends a year. It’s the idea of editing time, which I’ve always found very interesting. It’s finding different rhythms of time.

PH: You were mentioning Calvino; I love the series of lectures that he was to deliver at Harvard [Six Memos for the Next Millennium]. Alas, he died before he could present them. He has one extraordinary chapter on speed, quickness, and lightness. He invokes the image of festina lente: take haste slowly. In your case, there’s a sense of speech that has a gallop. You were mentioning before that you used to travel a lot by train. I can hear the train of your thought, the speed at which words try to keep up with what you’re thinking.

HUO: It’s jumping universes, nonlinearly. Many of these conversations grow ideas. For example, when Liu Coxin, who’s a Chinese science-fiction writer, talked about the future and mankind having lost its passion for exploring space—the idea that we need a second age of exploration—it prompted me to make a book on the future in China. Or when speaking to Stuuds Terkel many years ago, he basically told me, “Conversations cannot only produce conversations.” He told me that at a certain moment, when [publisher André] Schiffrin told him he should write a book, all of a sudden he actually started to write books based on conversations. That’s interesting because I’ve now started to write a lot. It has to do with the memory of what Stuuds Terkel told me. In some way, all of these conversations lead to projects that cross-fertilize each other. It’s a complex, dynamic system with many feedback loops.

PH: How do you prepare?

HUO: With exhibitions, it’s usually a long period of incubation and research. It’s talking to many people, putting a team together. With books, it’s the same. With interviews, it’s usually reading a lot. Whenever I do, for example, a conversation with someone who’s not in the art world, whose work I don’t know that well, it’s a discipline of reading. It’s almost like being back at university and having a crash course on the person and reading everything I can find about this person.

PH: Do you think that there is such a thing as over-preparing?

HUO: Yeah, I think there can be over-preparing. I think you can also be over-organizing in terms of exhibitions. I think it’s about finding a mix between preparing and improvisation. For conversations, I put notes together. It’s the system of ordering disorder. I can really start to improvise. In a similar way, with exhibitions, I always want a moment of self-organization so that it’s somehow alive and organic. Very often, projects like the Serpentine Marathon evolve over five, 10 years. My exhibition “Do It” just had its 20th anniversary; the Marathon is in its eighth year now. Many of these exhibitions and projects are long- and short-duration. I believe in this idea that one doesn’t just work on one project, then move on to the next thing.

PH: Of improvisation, there’s a line I always use by the French novelist Pierre Mac Orlan: “Improvisation is something you prepare.” Or Nietzsche’s line: “A dancer needs to know where he puts his feet.” That knowledge of where the feet fall doesn’t come completely naturally. One also needs to have practiced in order to do this and for it to seem effortless. I wanted to ask you about the Serpentine Marathon. Even the notion of calling it a marathon: You obviously know the Greek origins of it and why there was such a thing as a marathon when the Athenians announced that the Persians had been defeated in battle. What brought about the idea that you and Rem Koolhaas would spend 24 hours speaking at the first Marathon in 2006? I might add to that: What’s the advantage of such a long conversation? And did you at times, like your friend Gadamer, just fall asleep?

HUO: The idea is in its eighth year now. Many of these exhibitions and projects are long- and short-duration. I believe in this idea that one doesn’t just work on one project, then move on to the next thing.

PH: What’s remarkable is that you’re fighting the current in our culture of immediacy, of quickness. Interestingly enough, Werner Herzog and I have been invited to speak in Iceland, and Werner said that he would do it under one condition: that we speak for five consecutive hours.

HUO: Yes, and that obviously leads to Werner Herzog marching long distances on foot.

PH: When you were on my stage in New York with Rem Koolhaas last year, you said that every day, wherever you are, you buy a book.

HUO: Yeah, that’s true. I’ve got the brutally Early Club at 6:10. I’ve got my early-morning jogging habits, and then there’s this idea of buying a book every day. At the Zurich airport this morning, I bought Journey to the End of the Universe by Uwe Wedner, who’s a Swiss writer in his late 70s. It’s his attempt to write about the impossibility of writing an autobiography. He talks about this idea: We live in the future, we invent it, and then we remember the future we’ve created.

PH: What are you most excited about doing in the next year?

HUO: I’m very excited about next year’s Serpentine program. I’m also looking forward to the moment of finishing my book for Penguin [Ways of Curating]. And I hope that my biggest unrealized project will be realized, which is to have a conversation with Jean-Luc Godard. It’s a dream I’ve never succeeded in making happen. Which leads me to the question for you: Do you have someone you’ve wanted to have a conversation with that has remained unrealized?


HUO: Amazing.

PH: Let’s end with the words “Leonard Cohen.” May our unrealized dreams come true: that before you die, you speak to Jean-Luc Godard, I to Leonard Cohen.

HUO: Let’s make it happen.
With Instagram, Hans Ulrich Obrist showcases the lost art of handwriting in the digital age.

Hans Ulrich Obrist joined Instagram in December 2012 and has since posted more than 400 photographs of handwritten notes from the distinguished people he meets. One might expect the feed of one of the world’s most influential curators to be a rich collage of filter-enhanced art, architecture, and beautiful people. Either that or a ghost town, an account updated just a few times out of beginner’s curiosity before its busy user decided that real life was more interesting.

Obrist’s feed is active but unassuming. He averages roughly one upload a day. His posts are pictures of scrambles on paper, not exactly #wow material, and the messages themselves are often cryptic or illegible (though Obrist always types out the text and attributes the author in a caption). Pay them some attention, though, and the images start to take on a strange power—one that’s not just linked to the celebrity or cool factor of the artists, writers, architects, and public figures writing the words.

Part of the notes’ power comes from the startling reminder that we don’t see much handwriting anymore. Correspondence today is rendered in computer fonts and emoji, and it’s entirely possible to have a lengthy relationship with someone and never know how he or she writes “hello.” We’re probably missing something important because of this. Studies have shown a link between handwriting and personality, how the shape, size, and ligatures of our script can reveal details about our inner lives and character traits. There’s something illuminating but oddly voyeuristic about carefully examining a note written by a stranger. It feels like peeking at a private moment—even when we’re reading a message from artist Sarah Morris that proclaims: “Nothing is private. Everything is up for grabs.”

One also feels the pleasure of matching texts with one’s perceptions of their authors. A haiku from Björk—“handwritten or typed / galaxies colliding / coexist on axis”—is written in blue highlighter ink with childlike unevenness, and it could easily be a lyric in one of the Icelandic musician’s ethereal songs. A suggestive memo from John Waters reads, “Six fuzzy beavers quickly jumped the narrow gap”—a very John Waters’ rendition of the well-known typographer’s pangram. “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.” And the ever-audacious Kanye West reminds us that “good taste is a gift but bad taste is a privilege,” even throwing in a doodle of a ninja for emphasis.

Eager to evaluate these gems—and the occasional dad—from Obrist’s nearly 35,000 followers, and the opinions and commentaries left in the comment sections are almost as entertaining to read as the featured texts. Consider the public remarks made for a missive from artist Domínique Gonzalez-Foerster, who, for her contribution, wrote, “We need a new password she said” in a small notebook held open by someone’s thumb. The following comments are sic, with the handles switched to fruit types for privacy:

@apple: Your thumb is a pen? Woah! You
@orange: How the f is this art? ‘Ve been
@kiwi: yes please do that!
@pear: Tut tut tut tic-duc
@banana: The quick brown fox jumps over
@peach: @hansulrichobrist should write
@banana dislike
@pineapple: Clearly she has not listened to
@apple: Your thumb is a pen @hansulrichobrist
@apple: @hansulrichobrist should write
@pineapple: How the f is this art? ‘Ve been
@orange: How the f is this art? ‘Ve been

And so forth. The fact that anyone can contribute anything to the comments is both the best and worst feature of any open web platform, but for an Instagram feed like Obrist’s, the miniature public fora created by these posts reinforce the aesthetic and cultural value of the posts themselves. Each like or response adds to the aura of what is essentially an electronic record of a written record, a signifier of a signer.

Despite the irony of preserving analog content with a digital medium, Instagram tailors-made for Obrist, whose projects tend to be cumulative and ongoing affairs. His “Do It” exhibition series and Interview Project have been in progress for two decades; he is a pains-taking collector who keeps adding to a body of work and extending its scope, rather than racing toward a completion date. Instagram’s single vertical stream helps to marshal the plurality of handwriting styles and personalities Obrist encounters. But it also draws attention to the evolution of the feed, which began a year ago with photographs of people and objects and is now dedicated almost exclusively to these handwritten notes. Its development is a fitting metaphor for how we ourselves evolve, a virtue captured perfectly in a note to Obist from none other than Frank Gehry. “THIS IS MY HANDWRITING,” the first line reads, in nimble chicken scratches. Below it, in shaky, inkly cursive, is another sentence: “This was my handwriting.”

For the following pages, eight of Obrist’s friends sent usSurface their own notes—and the view of those on Obrist’s Instagram feed—to run exclusively in this issue.
handwritten or typed galaxies colliding coexist on axis

Etel Adnan, writer and artist

Ultimately, our real home is our life
Etel Adnan

Konstantin Grcic, designer
Koo Jeong-A, artist (Im Hak is not equal to Mongdal ghost)

Marina Abramovic, artist

Life is a miracle
Olafur Eliasson, artist

Peter Fischli, artist

Ziad Antar, filmmaker and photographer (A little bit of oil from the tree of life)

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

HANS ULRICH OBRIST
Simon Castets highlight talents born in 1989 and after with $9plus.

This 29-year-old curator and Hans Ulrich Obrist both read the quote and found it difficult to forget.

..."You never thought it's going to be. This happened to be..." Castets says. "I was surprised..." Obrist says. "I was..." Castets says. "It sounds insane. People were doing very interesting work. This happened to be..." Obrist says. "It sounds insane. People were doing very interesting work. We had an overall amount of data. I think people are making art."

..."When you're looking up one word, next to it you might see something that you've never heard of, and that opens up a different possibility. That's something."

..."In the beginning, we were relying on something. In the dictionary or the encyclopedia," Castets says.

..."When you're looking up one word, next to it you might see something. It's an apt reminder. It's an apt reminder: 'I'll bring people from my own generation to the platform.' Castets says. "I actually think that's one of the great privileges you have..." Obrist says. "It's an apt reminder. Though the 20- or 30-year-old newcomers are worth admiring, the in-between generations often contribute some of the strongest work. Castets and Obrist are prime examples.

..."The platform's focus is 'It is not a project about youth, uhh, it's about a generation that happens to be young at this moment.' Even so, he hopes $9plus will prove one potential advantage of youthful ardor. "Recent art history has proven many times that people at age 22 or 23 are not only active but also prolific and relevant and doing some of their strongest work," Castets says.

..."For the program's research, exhibitions, or events, since debuting at the Digital-Life-Design conference in Munich last January, $9plus has organized different iterations of events around the world: conferences at MoMA PS1, Palazzo Grassi, and Art Basel Hong Kong; artist residencies at the Park Avenue Armory in New York and L.A.-based artist Doug Aitken's cross-country "Station to Station" train project; and more. In October, a two-day Marathon at London's Serpentine Sackler Gallery brought together $9plus' program participants, in addition to established creators like architect Zaha Hadid, artist Carsten Höller, and designer Martino Gamper—each of whom dialogue with their younger counterparts.

..."It's not enough when software engineer Tim Berners-Lee wrote the proposal for what would become the World Wide Web in that year. The team's research explored how the web generation collects information and interacts with the virtual landscape. Unsurprisingly, many of the participants at the Marathon had a digital component to their work. Niko Ikon and Tierney Finster, winners of the Re-Bootagendorf Serpentine Grant, screened a semi-nostalgic music video that they had shot on a VHS camera, while artist Felix Melia created an art film for the popular Generation-Y app Snapchat."

..."Embracing the new, though, doesn't mean dismissing the old. "When I was going to high school, I had to look something up in the dictionary or the encyclopedia," Castets says. "When you're looking up one word, next to it you might see something you've never heard of, and that opens up a different possibility. That's something you lose in the Google era, but at the same time you gain a tremendous amount of other things.

..."Two elements unite the rapidly expanding group of $9plus participants: their digital proficiency and their young age. But Castets is quick to dispel age as the platform's focus: "It is not a project about youth, uhh, it's about a generation that happens to be young at this moment." Even so, he hopes $9plus will prove one potential advantage of youthful ardor. "Recent art history has proven many times that people at age 22 or 23 are not only active but also prolific and relevant and doing some of their strongest work," Castets says.

..."That line of thinking could apply to Castets himself, who in November stepped into the role of director and curator of the Swiss Institute Contemporary Art in New York. When announcing his appointment, the institute cited Castets's age as a way to help the program expand audiences. "I'll bring people from my own generation to the platform," Castets says. "I actually think that's one of the great privileges you have working in contemporary art—working with your contemporaries." It's an apt reminder. Though the 20- or 30-year-old newcomers are worth tracking and the 70- or 80-year-old masters worth admiring, the in-between generations often contribute some of the strongest work. Castets and Obrist are prime examples.
Serpentine Gallery director Julia Peyton-Jones may be an Officer of the British Empire and a commanding presence on the London art scene, but she’s anything but intimidating. In fact, she’s gracious, elegant, and egalitarian. Which perhaps explains her success—despite many obstacles—at turning the once-ailing Serpentine into one of the world’s most respected public arts institutions. Before starting at the gallery in 1991, Peyton-Jones was the curators of exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery; prior to that, she was a practicing artist and a lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art. Her beginnings suggest an almost painterly outlook: Each decision Peyton-Jones has made over the years—from conceiving the Serpentine Pavilion in 2000 to hiring co-director Hans Ulrich Obrist in 2006—can be viewed as a brush stroke. And today’s Serpentine, the cumulative result of that effort, is her ongoing masterwork. Surface executive editor Spencer Bailey sat down with Peyton-Jones for breakfast at the Pelham Hotel in London’s Kensington neighborhood to discuss her role at the gallery—and what it’s like to work alongside Obrist.

Spencer Bailey: Twenty-two years ago, the Serpentine was not the powerhouse it is today—you couldn’t even put on a show in the wintertime due to heating issues. You’ve been quite the problem solver. What’s been your approach?

Julia Peyton-Jones: It’s like when you look at a painting you’re doing and you say, “It needs a bit more red in the top right-hand corner.” You look at what you’ve done, and you always say, “Is it complete? Can I improve it? What does it need now, what do I need to do?” The idea of change is actually embedded in it. You never get to a point where it’s fixed. Of course, this approach is a strategy, but it’s not a business plan.

SB: Would you say you have business savvy? You’re clearly skilled at managing the public image of the gallery.

JPJ: When I started in ’91, the building was a terrible mess, a complete disaster. It needed to be renovated—it was a whole fundraising thing. And then, post-renovation, I had to figure out how to use this new platform. It was very usual for me to go out to dinner and hear people say, “Contemporary art? Oh dear! I’m sorry, but this is not serious.” The press would say to me, “Tell me why this is art. Tell me why my child of 3 couldn’t do this.” I would reply, “Don’t disregard the Serpentine as being a little tearoom, because you’re wrong. It’s not. It’s really completely different because it can do all these things.”

In the early days, we did a Man Ray exhibition that included loans from the MoMA, Tate, and other major museums. It was organized very quickly at a time when there was a huge polemic about Man Ray and authenticity. Our exhibition fell smack into that whole discussion, and we were able to hold our heads up. The exhibition not only escaped the controversy, but was considered to be richer. We did a show with Basquiat in the early ’90s that industrialist and art collector Peter Brant still refers to as his favorite showing of Basquiat’s work—or at least he did 18 months ago. At that time, there was a very urgent need to show work by artists who were regularly discussed internationally, and whose work had not been seen in the U.K.

If I’d sat down in ’91 and said, “I’m going to do all these things,” I wouldn’t have been able to imagine it. But if you’re living in the moment, I think it becomes clearer. I wouldn’t say it becomes absolutely clear, but it becomes clearer. The overwhelming desire is for us to present programs that I think are needed for our institution. That’s really it. And to develop the institution for the programs we need to present here.

SB: Over the past 25 years, there has been a cultural shift in the U.K. in how people think about architecture and art. What changed?

JPJ: At the heart of it, we became less of an island. I remember well a lecture Hans Ulrich
At the heart of it, culture plays a massive part.

JPJ: If you run a public institution, it comes which absolutely blasted everyone’s conven...level was seven years: I did foundation, under...

It was a kind of opening up. It was a psycho-

logical and literal opening up of the country...

each of these gala dinners. The brilliant thing—

and what changed everything—was that Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media, and Sport, who was a visionary man, came to this dinner. He was responsible for the Royal Parks. He loved the pavilion, and I said, “Well, can it stay for longer?” He said, “Of course, why not?” He had the gift to change every...

The next year, the great decision was to do it again—or not. There was an immense amount of to-ing and fro-ing, but we did do it again. We invited Daniel Libeskind, and what was incredibly exciting about that was that he and his wife, Nina, were extraordinarily in the way they embraced the project. I mean, we had absolutely no money. I don’t mean we had a couple of thousand pounds. We had nothing. Nothing. Never before had we done anything in a discipline that we had no knowledge of. We had knowledge of working with artists—we’d commissioned them many times—but archi-

tecture was not the same. Still, we did it. It was like a thriller: Are we going to get what we need? Are we going to find somebody to pay for it? Is the scheme going to fly?

SB: This brings us on an interesting point:

What happens to the pavilions after they’re taken down?

JPJ: They’re all sold. Because we still have no more money to do them, the financial package is a very simple one: We get support from the construction industry—we have people who sponsor the pavilions—and the sale of each one contributes to no more than 40 percent of its cost. Usually they’re bought by individuals.

SB: The early pavilions must have seemed like daring ventures to a lot of people...

JPJ: When you do something that’s very public, with which you have no experience and no money, it’s like, “Hmm, how’s this going to work?” But it remains an incredibly exciting project. The risk is there from the outset—but that hasn’t changed. And the outcome is completely undetermined when you start. You really put it in the idea, just as you don’t when you’re commissioning artists.

A couple of years ago, somebody described us as amateurs. I was very offended. I was like, “What are you talking about, amateurs? We are very professional!” Then I thought, Absolutely, we’re amateurs. And how fantastic is that? Because it means that we don’t know enough. And if we ask something that’s a complete taboo, we don’t know enough to know it’s taboo. We can be fearless in a way. We don’t know the boundaries because nobody else is doing it.

I was asked recently, “What’s the definition of the pavilion program?” And the answer I gave was the definition of the Pavilion pro-

gram, because I think they can be transposed. We ask the architects or artists to design a pavilion that encapsulates their architectural language and pushes their architectural vision to the limits. We’re encouraging them to do something within the context we provide.

SB: You chose Zaha Hadid to design the new Serpentine Sackler Gallery, located a short walk from the pavilion. Why did you hire her firm for the job?

JPJ: It was an interesting situation because she didn’t have until now a building in the center of London. We chose Zaha because we had a long history with her: one unrealized proj-

ect and three realized projects. She had done the pavilion in 2000, the “Lilas” installation in 2007, and another project for one of our summer parties, which was not our commis-

sion, but it was brought into the context of the Serpentine.

I told her, “We need to do this. It’s an oppor-
tunity. It’s against the odds that we’re going to get it, but we really need to do it.” So we did the Sackler design, which was something that was formulated very quickly from a drawing. We put together the business plan, and then began a series of interviews with the Royal Parks. Not only were we not a frontrunner, we were the least likely of the candidates to get it. The feeling was that we had a building in the Royal Park and that it was somebody else’s turn. Once they awarded the building to us, the Royal Parks said, “When are you going to start? They put us on an incredibly tight timeline. We were successful in the bid-

ding only because we’d raised all the money.

I don’t know how it works in the U.S., but in the public sector in the U.K., when you decide you’re going to build a museum or adapt a museum, you do the scheme, and then you say to funders, “Would you like to support it?” It’s a process that can take years, decades in some cases. But this was not the case with us. We were told, as soon as we got it, “You need to start. And if you don’t start, you will be paying rent in spite of the fact.” The Department of Commerce picked Zaha’s scheme, which was part of our business plan, so there wasn’t an opportunity to say, “Oh, let’s recast this and go out to competition.” Not that we would have wanted to.

SB: What’s Zaha’s relationship to the gal-

lery now?

JPJ: She’s a very dear friend of our chairman, Lord Palmouro, who’s also chairman of the Pritzker Prize. He’s one of our advisors for the pavilion and is a trustee of the gallery. She often says, “Oh, Julia, you never listen to my advice!”—which is not true. We do absolutely
Wentworth, who mentioned him to me.

JPJ: We were introduced by the artist Richard.

JPJ: Yes, and the Marathons are very much a part of the way the Pavilion program developed. It was Hans Ulrich who joined the gallery in 2006. The Marathons are extraordinary. In the same way the Pavilion is an exhibition of architecture, the Marathon is an exhibition of ideas. It’s a wonderful concept and really at the very heart of our collaboration and the starting point of our discussions. We talked a great deal before we decided we were going to work together.

SB: How do you and Hans Ulrich collaborate at the gallery?

JPJ: We’re both co-directors of exhibitions and programs, so the job is divided between us. He’s director of international projects, and I’m director of the institution. We have a very fluid relationship. The program is where we connect at the heart of everything. But he’s an excellent fundraiser, very good at table- seating plans. I was an artist and have been a curator for all my life. It’s the idea of one plus one equals eleven. Hans Ulrich’s knowledge of culture is astonishing. How lucky we are, how lucky I am, to be able to have this fantastic collaboration that is, as you might imagine, quite stimulating and productive.

SB: When did you first meet Hans Ulrich?

JPJ: We were introduced by the artist Richard Wentworth, who mentioned him to me. Richard was a trustee at the time. I invited Hans Ulrich to curate a show called “Take Me, I’m Yours” in 2009. The connections are his neurological connect...
Hans Ulrich Obrist has been drawing since he was a teenager in the mid-1980s. This was the time when he first started meeting artists in Switzerland and elsewhere through his travels. These first encounters with artists—Alighiero Boetti, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Gilbert and George, Gerhard Richter—were what made him decide he wanted to work with artists and that curating would be his work, even though he admittedly didn’t really know what a curator did.

Obrist took night trains all over Europe, going to as many as 30 cities in 30 days. It was during these trips that he started to draw. At first, the drawings were systematic notes and sketches about exhibitions, and simple lists of things he had seen and artists he had met. According to Obrist, these drawings served no real purpose. What’s more, he generally lost them as soon as he made them.

As Obrist began his career as a curator, he continued to sketch. Over time, what he made changed and diversified. There were still the drawings related to exhibition-making. But during the 1990s, Obrist began his Interview Project. And during those recorded conversations with artists, philosophers, scientists, writers, and anyone else who piqued his curiosity, Obrist would write notes and sketch out ideas and images that came up as he was interviewing. He also began to do more public speaking. As a result of nervousness, he began to obsessively write and sketch before and sometimes during a lecture or speech. These drawings, inspired in part by Georges Perec and the Oulipo movement in France in the 1960s, are essentially a form of public notation.

The presence of paper plays an important role in Obrist’s drawings. A fair number of them are made on hotel stationery. There are also papers from the various institutions where Obrist has worked or curated. There are drawings made over printouts of emails and texts, like a kind of contemporary palimpsest. Layers upon layers of notes, names, and ideas that exist on the same plane but evoke radically different parallel realities.

Obrist loses the pens he uses to draw as regularly as he loses the drawings themselves. He often draws with pens from the hotels where he stays. Many pens come from stewards and stewardesses on flights, and from lobbies of offices he passes by. He claims to never own a pen longer than a day.

Looking at just a few of Obrist’s drawings, one would get a sense of a fertile, frenetic, and possibly obsessive mind. Yet their intensity and variety betray a semblance of continuity between concerns and attitudes that he returns to over and over again. Seeing many of them in a sequence, it’s possible to feel as if one is looking at the rhythm of how he thinks. Even though some drawings are much denser than others and some are just one or two words on a piece of paper, one can feel the pulse of a mind at work and an at play.

Obrist has never paid much attention to his drawings. To him, they were merely working documents—a kind of toolbox. This is why there’s no annotation of any kind for them. Obrist simply didn’t keep track; they weren’t that important. What was more crucial for him was the moment that was experienced in the process of listening, making, talking, or doing whatever it was he felt worth doing. The drawings are merely expressiosnistic remainders of what was not consumed as fuel for planning an exhibition, editing a book, or imagining a Marathon. Still, he’s conscious enough about drawing as an essential act in the process of his work that he carries around piles of paper in his suitcase when he travels, in case something strikes him as worthy of remembering on paper.

Obrist’s sketches teeter on the edge of being recognized as artworks. They are certainly beautiful and enigmatic. And they capture—as any work ought to—the act of becoming something neither predicted nor pre-established.

Are they real works? Who knows? Then again, nobody who recognizes what they really are cares.

This is an edited version of the introduction to the forthcoming book Think Like Clouds (Badlands Unlimited), by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
Milen, could you tell me when you decided to become an artist? What was your first epiphany?

You got specialized in drawing musicians and dancers. Do you remember who the first musician you drew was? Could you tell me about this first experience?

You met your husband, Hans Keller, while on an assignment to draw musicians at a concert. How did this orientate your career? Did he have an influence on your work?

You documented high culture, but also ordinary life. How do you use to interact with your subjects?

I’m very interested in the archive process. Do you see your work as a visual archive of musicians?

Ernest Gombrich called you ‘a master of the illusion of movement’ (inscription in the copy of Art and Illusion he gave Cooman in 1965). What do you feel when you describe movement only on paper?

You draw at speed as your subject is moving, capturing the energy in the strokes of your pen. Do you work on your drawings after a session or do you leave them as such?

Every artist has unfinished projects. Could you tell me a bit about yours?
I met Hans Ulrich a long time ago, in the mid-’90s at a dinner in Zurich, through [art dealer and gallery owner] Iwan Wirth.

One time, he had come to L.A., and I had a model that I had made of the “White Snow” installation [that was shown at the Park Avenue Armory earlier this year with the exhibition title “WS”]. I’d given up on it and decided that I would move on to another project. I figured I’d maybe come back to it in a couple of years. I was kind of okay with just leaving it in the studio. Hans Ulrich saw the model, and we had a talk about it. I don’t know how long it was after that—maybe six months or a year—when he called me and asked, “Could we put the ‘White Snow’ piece in the Armory?” I’d given up on it and decided that I would move on to another project. I figured I’d maybe come back to it in a couple of years. I was kind of okay with just leaving it in the studio. Hans Ulrich saw the model, and we had a talk about it. I don’t know how long it was after that—maybe six months or a year—when he called me and asked, “Could we put the ‘White Snow’ piece in the Armory?” I didn’t know what it would mean. It was a one- or two-month process of figuring out if we would do it. Then I decided that we could go for it.

It was all super risky because of how large it would be. Once we decided to do it, it was all about trying to get it done. Then, once it was done, the reality hit: Could we even move it? By moving it, would we destroy it? The gamble was really big. There were all kinds of issues, including the [explicit] content of the piece. They weren’t sure they could even show it. Even after the piece was made and being moved there—the trucks were leaving—the Armory was still asking, “What have we agreed to do?”

All the way through, Hans Ulrich was completely supportive, always positive. It had to do with really wanting to see it done, and for me, it might not even have happened if he hadn’t shown up. It’s very typical of him to be positive and supportive of the artist. Art is what he cares about. —As told to Bettina Korek

PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH.
Jacques Herzog
Founder and senior partner, Herzog & de Meuron

We’ve known each other more than 14 years. He’s interviewed me quite a few times. Through the Serpentine Pavilion project [in 2012] we really started to understand better what we could do together, how we would work with artists—in this case, Ai Weiwei. I think we started to appreciate what the other did. Since then, we have made this collaboration more intense. We have two or three ongoing projects.

The Serpentine Pavilion project was very fast. Pierre de Meuron [and I] could see how helpful and how stimulating it must be for an artist to work with Hans Ulrich when he’s doing a show, because he’s so encouraging, he’s so dear and careful. We always felt he was so supportive, but he would not come and say, “Let’s do this and not that.” He would never be so direct. That’s not his character. His magic somehow is that he can be influential and be present without being intrusive. It’s kind of an absence of intensity.

I think what’s super surprising is that you don’t really know what Hans Ulrich does, but you know he does so incredibly much. We could say nice things about Hans Ulrich that everybody else would also say: He’s amazing, connected, he knows all artists, all architects, all curators. He knows everything and everybody. He’s like a living network. When you’re with him, you feel connected to other people, other projects, other ideas.

He has an almost nonphysical presence, something fugitive. His constant traveling enhances this impression. I often wonder how he can physically and mentally bear that. How can one bring things down to the ground with such a way of living? The great thing about him is not that he does so many projects, but that so many projects come out well and are innovative and new and interesting.

Being around Hans Ulrich is very often sheer pleasure. You feel he makes the moment very special. I think this is a very extraordinary and artful way of living. In this sense he is like an artist himself. He says, “This is the moment, this is what we have to do.” —As told to Spencer Bailey

David Chipperfield
Architect

I’ve never really worked with Hans Ulrich, but he has been a continual presence in my life, the most energetic, purposeful person I’ve ever met.

There’s a story he likes to tell about us. I travel a lot, and always arrive at Heathrow early, semi-conscious. I have a bowl of cereal, read a newspaper, and stay in my bubble. I use plane time to sleep, even on a short haul. So I’m going through security, and Hans Ulrich is calling my name. To my surprise, we’re both on the same plane to Berlin and seated next to each other. He takes on board a suitcase on wheels and a briefcase. “How long are you staying, Hans Ulrich?” I ask. “Just a day,” he says, leaving me wondering what he could have in such a big suitcase. On board, he opens the suitcase, and it’s full of papers, a huge wad, like a mobile office. His underpants and shirt are in his briefcase. It was charming. We talked for the hour-and-a-half flight. Such is his enthusiasm to spark ideas.

Hans Ulrich is a very free spirit, continuously curious. I remember one time at an event in Morocco his plane was delayed and we kept getting messages that he was stuck somewhere. He eventually arrived at 1 p.m., and was due to depart at 6 the next morning. Yet at midnight he headed off to see a certain institution. I’d turned in by then. His almost childlike enthusiasm is contagious. He has an incredible charm. —As told to Nonie Niesewand

Samuel Keller
Director, Beyeler Foundation

My earliest memories of Hans Ulrich go back to the mid-’90s. He was a character I would come across at biennials: a pale, young, tall man schlepping around a large bag with lots of documents, usually catalogues, always running around at a very fast pace. At that time, there weren’t so many people at all the big art events around the world. Whenever I showed up somewhere, Hans Ulrich was often already there—but only for 24 hours.

The first project we did together was in 2002 when I was the director of Art Basel. At that time, art fairs were just galleries showing art works in booths. I thought they should have a stronger cultural component; involve artists, curators, and collectors; and educate the public. Hans Ulrich seemed to me the right person to create new platforms for dialogue in the art world. So I invited him as the first guest of what’s now Art Basel’s Salon. Although he came half an hour late, it was an instant success. Through that, I asked Hans Ulrich if he would be willing to work with me and a small team to create a series of talks, panel discussions, publications, and artist interviews during Art Basel, which we named Conversations. Hans Ulrich was—and is—the spirit, the director, the mastermind behind that. From that moment on, we’ve never stopped collaborating.

Since I moved from Art Basel to the Beyeler Foundation, we’ve done numerous projects together. I helped him realize his “Do It” book and the “Tempo Del Postino” exhibition at Basel. Currently we’re collaborating on the “14 Rooms” live art show he’ll co-curator with Klaus Biesenbach for Basel next June. I also invited him to curate an exhibition of Gerhard Richter [which will be shown at the Beyeler Foundation from May 18 to Sept. 7, 2014]. It will be both Richter’s and Hans Ulrich’s first large-scale exhibition in Switzerland.

We see each other quite a lot, and we communicate at least once a week. After we found out that we’re both very hard to reach, we started to call each other every Monday morning. Sometimes it’s not possible because we’re on a plane, or we’re far away, but in general we talk on Monday mornings. That’s our professional relationship, but we’re also friends. He never takes holidays, but if he did, he would be one of the people I would go on holidays with. He’s an admirable man, a genius and generous, and a bit eccentric, with a big heart and a great sense of humor.

I’ve always loved his interviews, especially when they’re live. When he’s speaking with an artist, the conversations show how much Hans Ulrich is the artist’s best friend. He’s really doing everything to make the artist feel comfortable, to give the artist a platform for what she or he would like to communicate. He’s never as maniacal as critics, trying to put himself front or showing how intelligent he is, how much he knows about the artist. There’s a level of confidence and trust between him and the artists. In that, artists reveal things that they would not usually share.

Hans Ulrich’s brain is so big, and it works so fast. If his brain were a muscle, it would be a big bodybuilder; it would look like Arnold Schwarzenegger in his best days. If you ask him to generate an idea, he just can’t stop generating them. For every opportunity you give him to have an idea, he will find plenty. Ideas come to him all the time.

He’s someone whose horizon extends beyond art and into science, architecture, literature, film, and so on. He has a broad sense of the world. He’s also someone who doesn’t want art to be in an ivory tower; he wants art in life, he wants it to reach a large public, and he still wants it to be able to preserve its intrinsic qualities. He’s a fantastic agent for art and artists in the world at large. —As told to S.B.
I met Hans Ulrich when I was in Paris doing a show with Marian Goodman [in 1997]. Marian asked if I would like to have dinner with this young guy who was in town, and it was Hans Ulrich. I kept calling him Hans, and Marian said, “No, it’s Hans Ulrich.” Hans Ulrich and [artist] Meg Cranston did a lot of the work on [my two volumes of collected writings]. The books are a way of understanding and going back and thinking about what was going on in my head. I’m glad I wrote things down. It’s good to review my thinking process, what was absorbing me and what was interesting me. I never thought it would be two volumes. That was Hans Ulrich’s idea, and then I jokingly came up with the title [More Than You Wanted to Know About John Baldessari].

We just worked on a show together at the Garage [Center for Contemporary Art] in Moscow, “1 + 1 = 1.” It was from a whole series of works that had been spread over four or five gallery shows. It came about when Hans Ulrich called me up and said, “How about doing this as a show at the Garage?” I said great, because I hadn’t had the opportunity to unite these works and see them together. I also participated in two other Hans Ulrich shows, “11 Rooms” in Manchester and “13 Rooms” in Sydney [both co-curated with Klaus Biesenbach]. For Manchester, the idea was to realize a project I had proposed for the “Information” show at MoMA [in 1970]. MoMA had said no, and then somehow Hans Ulrich found it and said, “Why can’t we do it?” Manchester made assiduous efforts to realize it, but what was shown was the correspondence. Hans Ulrich is somehow still convinced it can be done. He fills me with optimism. In his mind, anything can be done. I really like that attitude. —As told to B.K.
I met Hans Ulrich on a night train in 1993 on the way to the Venice Biennale. At the time, there were no cheap flights, so you took night trains. I remember I locked the compartment I was in. I pretended I was sleeping and that the compartment was full. In Innsbruck, Austria, somebody entered the compartment and brought in all his papers and books. I wanted the light out; he wanted it on. He wanted to read and work, and I needed to sleep. In the morning, we started to talk about contemporary art. That’s how we met: fighting over a train compartment.

The first thing we worked on together was research. Hans Ulrich used to have an apartment in the ‘90s and ’94 on Crampton Street in London. We called it the Crampton Street Disaster. He and his partner, Koo Jeong-A, and I stayed there. He wouldn’t sleep at the time. He had the Leonardo da Vinci rhythm: He would sleep for 15 minutes every three hours. We would wake up at 5, get ready, walk to Burger King—which opened at 5:30 or 6—and then we would do constant studio visits until we dropped. We’ve frequently been working together ever since.

My relationship with Hans Ulrich is rooted in the ’90s, when the Internet wasn’t so ubiquitous. We used to do these telephone conferences. Actually, we still do them. Last year, when Hurricane Sandy happened, we were in the midst of a telephone conference. It got so loud on my side that at some point Hans Ulrich said, “What’s going on?” I said, “Hans Ulrich, my phone is going to die soon. There is a flood in front of my building, I have no electricity anymore, and I see that the power station is on fire.” These long brainstorming sessions and phone conversations that we’ve continued since the ’90s have accompanied real life.

I consider Hans Ulrich a pacemaker, a catalyst, an encyclopedia, an idea machine, and a very close friend. We were, in the mid-’90s, on the advisory committee of an institution in Japan. We travel the world with each other, and it’s always about art and facilitating for the artists. Hans Ulrich makes everything into a serious series by his never-ending curiosity and peripatetic moving-forward. He’s an incredible gentleman. He has the best manners. He’s a very, very curious curator who tries to meet and hear and see every significant image and idea in the world, literally not leaving anything out. — As told to S.R.

Klaus Biesenbach
Director, MoMA PS1, and Chief Curator-at-Large, MoMA
**John Brockman**

Founder, Edge Foundation

I remember Hans Ulrich came to visit me at my farm to do an interview. I think it was the best interview that anyone has done with me. It was February 1999, and it was titled “Brockman’s Taste for Science, or How to Entertain the World’s Smartest People.”

I’m interested in science and art, but I’m not at all interested in this conflation of people talking about art and science together. I learned about science by working with artists. John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik—they would give me books. Scientists in the McLuhanist sense were like the beacons of the avant-garde, sending signs to the public about what was coming up next. If I had an Edge Foundation event with [mathematician Benoit] Mandelbrot, every artist would come. But when the artists presented their work to scientists, it would be like ships passing. Art is a conversation, and the scientists were completely ignorant of what the conversation was at the time—they were stuck in 18th- and early-20th-century art ideas. (Has this changed? No.)

In terms of working with Hans Ulrich, I leave the art up to him and focus on the science. We haven’t been trying to bring artists and scientists together—intentionality kills everything. We haven’t even been trying to make it visible, and it can be the canvas. Turning that around and having scientists do art doesn’t make them artists. The project with Hans Ulrich that I liked the most was in Iceland, where he interviewed me in front of an audience. This was about three years ago. Olafur Eliasson was there. So was Marina Abramovic, with Dr. Ruth. Hans Ulrich and I have done several projects. One was “Maps for the 21st Century” at the Serpentine Gallery’s Map Marathon [in 2011]. Another was “Information Gardener” at the Garden Marathon [in 2011].

Hans Ulrich is one of a kind. In a world where almost everybody puts on yesterday’s newspapers as ideas—in a world where most people have never had an original thought—almost everything out of his mouth is interesting and fresh. I’ve never thought about my relationship with him, except that we’re good friends. I bring the scientists to the party, and he brings the artists. —As told to R.K.

**Olafur Eliasson**

Artist

I’ve known Hans Ulrich for, I don’t know, 15 years or so. I did some of my first exhibitions with him, and what’s important to me is that, in a way, we are still working on the thing we started on. Clearly, there is a dimension of the never-ending story, and as time passes—as the years go by—there is a certain value in this.

I think we have done maybe eight, nine, or 12 interviews now. Which isn’t really true, actually. We have only done one interview, and it has taken 10 years or so. That we don’t repeat ourselves is not totally true, but generally speaking, there has been, I think, a pretty straightforward trajectory. Think about it: In an hour or so, you cannot capture 12 years. When I sat down and talked to Hans Ulrich, the conversation was not just 10 minutes old; it’s 10 years old. There’s a certain depth of friendship. I mean, it’s incredible.

Hans Ulrich keeps asking, not about how you do things, but why you do things, and this, I think, is valuable. One can say that the core quality of Hans Ulrich is that he’s not about formulas; he’s more about the relevance to the time in which we are right now. This is why making an interview over 10 years obviously takes this whole other dimension. I don’t know whether anybody will ever listen through all of them. —As told to R.K.

**Zaha Hadid**

Architect

I think we first met while I was designing the 1998 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery (“Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art and Fashion”). We’ve done some great interviews, talks, and panel discussions together around the world. Hans Ulrich is such an intuitive and knowledgeable interviewer—the Conversation Series interviews we did were excellent.

Hans Ulrich is a superb curator and has done a great job at the Serpentine—though my opinion is biased, as I’m a trustee of the gallery. I like so much of his work, but his shows with Rem Koolhaas were especially memorable. He has a very sharp mind and so much passion. He’s a lovely guy and good friend. I love his energy and sense of humor. —As told to N.N.

**Anton Vidokle**

Founder, e-flux

Hans Ulrich and I met in Madrid about 14 years ago. We started spontaneously talking at an exhibition, and I gave him my email address. I had just started e-flux, and he was curious about it. He sent me a really long text in German about art and the Internet—I guess he assumes that everybody speaks every language that he does. As a joke, I did one of the early versions of automated online translations before Google, and it was completely incomprehensible. It sounded like a robot had written it. When he saw it, he went, “Wow, this is incredible. It’s better than the text that I sent you.” We’ve been friends and collaborators ever since. We’ve done many projects together in all sorts of capacities. Sometimes I’m an artist and he’s a curator; sometimes I’m a publisher and he’s a writer. Our roles constantly reverse. It’s a very unusual collaboration. It’s never the same.

The Agency of Unrealized Projects is something that came about when we were going to a conference in Rotterdam. Both of our planes arrived at some insane hour. We were on the street in Rotterdam at 5:30 in the morning, which was too early to check into the hotel, and we had nothing to do. We ended up in a café and had breakfast together. He was telling me about this book, Unbuilt Roads, that he had published in the early ’90s. It was a book of unrealized art projects for which artists sent him projects by fax that were unrealized for all sorts of different reasons, from censorship, to loss of funding, to ideas that are unrealizable by definition. He was fascinated by this idea, and I became interested in it, too. Everything in our world is a product of someone’s idea. This building is an idea, this table is an idea, this pen and notebook is an idea, each of which has reached a moment of realization. But for every idea that gets realized there are probably thousands that don’t. If you imagine the world as a kind of iceberg, where physical reality is just the tip of unrealized ideas of all sorts, it becomes really fascinating.

Unrealized ideas are particularly interesting in art, because, for example, in architecture there is a tradition of presenting them. This is because most architecture projects are in fact never realized—they remain proposals—but there are exhibitions, there are books that circulate and are discussed, and in this way unbuilt structures enter the discourse space of architecture. In art, however, it’s really tricky, because if an artwork isn’t made, it just does not exist. For me, what was interesting—and urgent—was to create a place for ideas that have never seen the moment of realization, and to develop a circulation mechanism for things that are unmade: unwritten books, unwritten novels, unwritten concertos, unmade objects.

When Hans Ulrich and I were talking at breakfast that morning in Rotterdam, I suggested we open an agency for this purpose. I meant it as a real agency: one that would administer unrealized artworks and amass an archive. This archive would sometimes be displayed somewhere, and perhaps someone could go through it and select something for realization. We started from there. Unbuilt Roads was comprised mainly of ideas by artists Hans Ulrich knew personally. I suggested to make the agency radically open, so that anyone could submit an unrealized project. This is because it’s not only artists who have ideas to make art. I’m completely fascinated by unrealized ideas by people who are not artists, or at least not professional artists. We created a very simple online form in which you could submit text and images, and we circulated an open call for unrealized art projects. So far, we’ve received several thousand submissions of all kinds.

For me, this almost becomes like a topographic survey of the contemporary artistic imagination. To date, the agency has done three exhibitions. Each time we present the agency, the archive keeps growing, and now we’re about to take the crucial step and put the whole archive online. In theory, we don’t see an end to this because there’s not a lack of unrealized projects. We plan to continue until we collect them all. —As told to S.B.
Peter Fischli

Artist

One day in 1983, Hans Ulrich called us and asked if he could come to our studio. He was a teenager. It was pretty exceptional—normally curators or collectors came. He was very interested, wanted to know everything, and asked smart questions.

During our third or fourth meeting, he came up with the idea for a “kitchen show.” He was very interested in architecture, philosophy, music, every field. He is ubiquitous. I’ve seen him pop up at Inhotim [art center in Brazil] at a conference, and in Munich, where he has invited me twice to the Digital-Life-Design conference. Each year, I see him in London, Paris, or Arles for our think tanks with my core advisory group: Beatrix Ruf, Tom Eccles, and Philippe Parreno. I’ve also seen him in New York, Stockholm, Dubai, Sharjah, Venice, Turin, Zurich, and on top of a Swiss mountain. And in the Caribbean, where he took off his shoes, but not his Agnis B suit.—As told to S.B.

We went and saw his apartment. He had no furniture, and he rang the doorbell to my studio, and I came down. They were in a taxi, and we went for a ride. I’m not sure if it was an appointment. Maybe they just showed up, which seems unbelievable nowadays.

One day in 1985, Hans Ulrich called us and invited me to be part of “Do It,” and then I was part of an exhibition called “Manifesta 4” in 2002. He saw my piece there, and he immediately asked me if I wanted to do an interview, which I guess is his way of talking to people. Although it was a proper conversation, it turned out to be a very enjoyable moment. We published it a few times, and we’ve done a number of interviews since. I’m not sure he’ll like me saying this, but in a way Hans Ulrich was saved by art. For him, it’s a psychological necessity.

Hans Ulrich is one of the most curious people I’ve met. He’s always hungry for new things. What’s next, what’s next, what’s next? He’s very sharp, always looking at the future, but also very curious about the past. He’s not only super interested in the field of art—that wouldn’t be enough for him—but also architecture, philosophy, music, every field. —As told to B.K.

Tino Sehgal

Artist

We met through [writer and curator] Jens Hoffmann. It must have been 2001. Jens and Hans Ulrich rang the doorbell to my studio, and I came down. They were in a taxi, and we went for a ride. I’m not sure if it was an appointment. Maybe they just showed up, which seems unbelievable nowadays.

Our first collaboration was when Hans Ulrich invited me to be part of “Do It,” and then I was part of an exhibition called “Manifesta 4” in 2002. He saw my piece there, and he immediately asked me if I wanted to do an interview, which I guess is his way of talking to people. Although it was a proper conversation, it turned out to be a very enjoyable moment. We published it a few times, and we’ve done a number of interviews since.

I think Hans Ulrich has very nice gestures. With one particular gesture, he’s kind of an introvert and extrovert at the same time. He speaks, then his arms open, and he kind of tilts his head. I once pointed it out to him, and he really tried to replicate it, but he didn’t have the right attitude. I then tried to replicate it, and I also failed. As a person who has a love for choreography, it’s definitely something to watch out for. If you can’t understand what Hans Ulrich is saying, just check out his gestures!

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Asking why people are fascinated with Hans Ulrich is like asking Coca-Cola for its recipe. It’s just a very specific mixture. He’s modest, he’s obsessive, he’s very intelligent, he’s very extroverted, and yet he’s also very shy. He combines a lot of opposites somehow.

What I often say to people when they first meet him is: “It’s very easy to overestimate him, and it’s very easy to underestimate him.”—As told to S.B.

Maja Hoffmann

Founder, LUMA Foundation

I met the young Hans Ulrich Obrist in 1992 at Jan Hoet’s “Documenta 9” on a rainy evening outside of the show. [Pierrot editor] Rice Courter introduced us. From then on, we kept bumping into each other, with a sudden increase since 2006 or 2007. I have a lively, delightful relationship with him. Starting this year, he’s a member of the LUMA Foundation, which I founded in Zurich in 2004. LUMA has helped the Serpentine Gallery produce three pavilions: SAANA’s in 2009, Peter Zumthor’s in 2011, and Sou Fujimoto’s this year. We also worked on a group show [in 2011], “To the Moon via the Beach,” for Arles, which Hans Ulrich co-curated with Philippe Parreno and Liam Gillick. The Sot of artists in the show ranged from Lawrence Weiner to Daniel Buren, from Uri Aran to Klara Lidén and Anri Sala, from Rirkrit Tiravanija to Pierre Huyghes. In 2010, he was the nominator of a selection of photographers for the Prix Découverte des Rencontres d’Arles. This show then traveled to the Garage in Moscow under the title “How Soon is Now?”

Hans Ulrich is an original innovator, a researcher, and a brain. His interviews in books or on video are incredible. He tours the planet with them. He is ubiquitous. I’ve seen him pop up at Inhotim [art center in Brazil] at a conference, and in Munich, where he has invited me twice to the Digital-Life-Design conference. Each year, I see him in London, Paris, or Arles for our think tanks with my core advisory group: Beatrice Ruf, Tom Eccles, and Philippe Parreno. I’ve also seen him in New York, Stockholm, Dubai, Sharjah, Venice, Turin, Zurich, and on top of a Swiss mountain. And in the Caribbean, where he took off his shoes, but not his Agnis B suit.—As told to S.B.
I met Hans Ulrich when he was 16 years old. It was 1984, and we had just started Parkett. I think it was before we even published the first issue. He showed up at the office, and there was this very, very young person saying, "Oh, I have heard you started the magazine."

"I want to buy the special-edition issue you announced, done by the Italian artist Enzo Cacchi, but I cannot pay for it in full. Can I pay you 20 Swiss francs every month?" We were, of course, touched. I mean, we were just in love with this young boy immediately.

He then started to follow us to gallery openings so he could sneak in with us to the dinners afterwards. Karen Marta was at the time the New York editor of Parkett, and she always was great in sending me stuff I should know about New York. She had sent me an article from The New Yorker about Walter Hopps, and I thought he was an incredibly important figure. I told Hans Ulrich to read it, because I knew that he had aspirations to also become an important curator.

Hans Ulrich has his wonderful energy to connect totally different worlds, totally different intelligences, and he creates a sort of new geography of intelligences. I think it’s like an image of a moment of history. Nobody does what he does. He breaks up the boxes where things are usually stored, and he connects them on a lively, energetic level. He doesn’t just do another dead thing, but a very lively thing. I think he one day should become the curator of one of those World Expos.

—As told to B.K.

Hans Ulrich is a good friend. I’ve always been one of his fans, even if I have not read everything he has written—it’s too much. You need to be like a marathon runner to read it all. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything. He’s very well known for not sleeping, but that’s just what he does. He reads everything.
During a visit to Milan in February 2001, Hans Ulrich Obrist met with 20th-century Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass to conduct one of several interviews with the legend, who passed away in 2007. The following is an edited version of the previously unpublished conversation.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I’d like to begin this interview with the catalogue of your first exhibition, held in ’66, which you curated with Bruno Munari.

Ettore Sottsass: I was living in desperate straits in Milan, quite penniless, and we were working on so-called abstract or concrete art, as it used to be called then, with immense enthusiasm. People just didn’t want to know about it. Actually, I could be described as an outsider back then. I was a pupil of Luigi Spazzapan, a gestural painter who worked in a very graphic style. Just think—gestural painting already in ’58! ’59! Even my own abstract art was halfway between gesture and figurative representation. It wasn’t unrecognizable as such, but underlying it was a form of figuration. The abstract art of Munari or [graphic designer] Max Huber or Max Bill was by contrast a much more concrete form of abstraction, much more downright, more geometrical.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Let’s examine the importance of fluidity and circulation between separate disciplines.

Ettore Sottsass: About unreality.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: That’s an interesting point. It’s an interesting and entertaining way of thinking about things.

Ettore Sottsass: I do things, what I imagine happens when I design something. So I don’t see the point of any clear-cut distinction between disciplines. Take the Renaissance. It was hardly an accident that the Renaissance was a period when many artists imagined, above all, a new kind of life. They imagined a new society, a new vision of the world, a new, say, interpretation of the potential of life. They didn’t make a major distinction between Brunelleschi’s dome and the design of, say, some other work of architecture.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Whenever your writings are published, there are always lots of questions, discussions that cause upheavals in artistic circles. And this happens not just here in Italy but also abroad among younger architects, with debates over what you assert fearlessly. Your position is immensely relevant because you speak rather critically about the world of highly specialized architecture. You have defined a much more transversal approach in practice, and for this very reason, perhaps, you also interest young architects today.

Ettore Sottsass: However you look at it, I feel the task of the designer or the architect is to design the artificial environment, from objects to architecture, spaces, and so on. Each design corresponds directly or indirectly to an idea one has of life, of society, of the relations between the individual and society. It corresponds to the form of the Weltanschauung [or worldview]; it remains the basic cultural background. And this happens in whatever you do. Whether I design a vase or design architecture, there is always this background, this basic cultural background. The difference, then, is only technical. It’s clear that if I’m designing architecture, I need to know things that are not the same as what I have to know to design a glass vase, and to design a glass vase you need to know things that are not the same as what you need to take a photograph. But apart from these technical differences—which are certainly important because they have an effect on what I can design and condition—there still remains, deep down, what I think of life, why I do things, what I imagine happens when I design something. So I don’t see the point of any clear-cut distinction between disciplines.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I find nowadays that it’s really interesting to try to grasp our relationship to certain developments in science.

Ettore Sottsass: I think it’s interesting that scientific progress began a big debate about uncertainty.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I'd like to begin this interview with the catalogue of your first exhibition, held in ’66, which you curated with Bruno Munari.
HUO: They talk about uncertainty. This is the doubt.

ES: It’s a doubt that’s developed in my own mind. But I think I’m not the only one to feel this. I believe it’s valid for scientists, too. A few years ago, I began to have some sense of the scale of the cosmos. I told myself our planet is in the solar system, which belongs to a galaxy, and in this galaxy there are hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of solar systems, and then you’ve got billions of galaxies. Well, at this point I said to myself: I can’t understand what all this means. Even the fact that we could see the earth rise from the moon or from the sky stunned me. It confirmed the fact that this planet is a paltry orb spinning in a void. From one moment to the next it could collide with something, or just die slowly of cold, or maybe it will last forever. And there’s also the whole effort consisted in trying to reach some point, to identify reality; today, it’s just the opposite. Today, we can’t get a grasp on anything. Existence is fragmentary, because we no longer accept the logic that we hoped to see to its end. HANS ULRICH OBRIST

HUO: As for science, I asked myself a lot of questions quite recently, after reading a book by a famous cyber expert who worked in the ’90s for Olivetti. You, too, since the ’90s, ’80s have worked in that field, and I wonder if you had any contact with scientists.

ES: No, but when I worked at Olivetti on electronics, it was back in 1950 or 1960.

HUO: When you were working on that first big computer [the Eles 9003]?

ES: Yes, a huge computer. It was in Pisa; I arrived by train. Then I had to get a horse-drawn carriage, because there were no taxis, and it took me to the outskirts of Pisa, where there was a 15th-century villa surrounded by a garden. Inside there were all these white-coated engineers walking among miles and miles of cables snaking across the floor. Even electronics in those days was a bomb of uncertainty. It still worked with valves, valves of colossal dimensions. Now, not so many years later, we all have nice little packets of electronics in our pockets.

HUO: You were one of the first to speak about a planetary and global influence. Many of your writings were very advanced in this respect; their topicality seems very significant. There is a presentation even in the use you make of the terms “planetary” or “global” that is really worth exploring, given the dimensions they have achieved today. On the one hand, all your work is research into archetypes, or rather into global segments, while on the other, you also study—what you call—the “local in great depth. This presents with such a degree of con-tradiction, don’t you feel?

ES: I feel very deeply—even if one is an atheist, even if he doesn’t seek the truth—that we are all compelled, conditioned, to act out a comedy. We’re doing it here, too, at this moment. You ring me up, you arrive, we do these things. At this moment, the comedy is reduced to this act: you, me, and our photography friend. You know there’s this histrionic routine, and there’s also the condition. What would be interesting, or at least I’d find it interesting, would be to understand, or try to understand, what the essence of this humanity is. Not its relationship with the cosmos, but its inner essence. Why are we men, what are we doing as men, what responsibilities we have as individuals with respect to society, and so forth. I find this is the most fascinating part of thinking at the current time. Héctor de Landaluce confirmed this fixation with trying to understand the human essence. Why do we think? What do we have these relationships? How far can we develop this line of argument, this comedy? How can we control this comedy or at least something about it? If you did an exhibition in a kitchen, for example, that would interest me greatly. To me, it’s like saying: “Okay, we’ve got to eat, we talk about eating, and we feel we’re intellectuals in this place, a place where you eat.”

HUO: About your research into kitchens—1 read a really interesting article dating from ’92. When did you start working on this topic?

ES: I can’t really say. I think some time in the sixties.

HUO: There are a lot of photos you took of kitchens.

ES: Yes, there are a lot, partly because first I was married to a lady by the name of Fernanda Pivano, a writer well known in Italy for translating and writing contemporary American literature, and she couldn’t even make a cup of tea. For reasons I won’t go into today, we split up, and I met another lady, Barbara Radice, and she has a lot to say about cooking—how it’s done. She talks a lot about it. There are pleasant houses where they hang a sheet of corn over the door for good luck. Then there are bank buildings that have massive doors that overawe you, so when you go and ask them for money, they make you wait and you feel this kind of impossibility, this thing I call destiny, something inevitable.

HUO: I read your texts on kitchens by chance, as well as your other books, during a period not far from when I first began to take an interest in the work of Italo Calvino. I often wondered whether or not there was a connection between you two.

ES: No, I knew him, but only casually. We never went beyond wishing each other good evenings, and we never worked together. But as for what you’re saying, or what you think, we went to America for the first time, and I met George Nelson. We Europeans—I don’t know if we can say “we Europeans”—but we belong to these cultures on this side of the Atlantic, we have death in our pockets. We can’t forget this destiny. There was a talk with George about death, he said, “We Americans never talk about death.” There’s an architect from San Diego who’s been working with me for years, Johanna Grawunder, and whenever she sees something even indirectly connected with death, she says, “That’s very strong.” Why is this? By contrast, in India, I found it very consoling. When you look out the hotel window every half-hour, you see a corpse being carried off, wrapped in a shroud and strewn with flowers. That ability to relate to this inexplicable phenomenon is consoling.

HUO: So you think the architect ought to make these things visible in his work? Or do things that are more important to you?

ES: It’s no use asking me this because by now I think there’s nothing to be done. This is because we now live in an industrial culture. We invented the machine a few centuries back, and I feel the machine fulfills its own destiny just as bronze, say, got a new way of waging war, of killing. The fact that a lot of products can be mass-produced with machinery, resulting in masses of products, inevitably means that we have to sell these products; we have to give them to someone, and selling them inevitably entails all the possible forms of persuasion so people will buy them. The upshot is that we think less and less because we’re increasingly conditioned. For all these reasons we can no longer say, “I wish the world was like this or like that.” The point, there is one, is to find a way to navigate our way through this destiny.

HUO: How do you think we can reverse this process?

ES: I don’t see a way. Anyway, I’m not someone who wants to change the world.

HUO: How do you view the city? Say, Milan, or the city in general, the plan-ning processes involved?

ES: The city is jam-packed with cars. With people, it hardly moves, and we all keep saying: “Hell! It’s full of cars, how can we keep going in a city like this?” But as long as Fiat or Mercedes keep on turning out 2,000 automobiles a day, they’ve got to go somewhere! And if we tell Fiat to quit making cars, there’ll be thousands of people out of work. I feel this kind of impossibility, this thing I call destiny, something inevitable.

HUO: It’s also interesting to see what’s happening in Asia. There are a lot of Westerners, planners, who tell the politicians, “You’ve got to prevent the kind of problems we already have from taking root here.”

ES: That’s inevitable. It would be like telling someone who lives by the sea not to go out in a boat, not to go fishing, or someone who was going to die not to be born. True, there’s a life jacket, but that’s not a solution. That’s why we increasingly talk about humdrum, everyday things, about private peace and quiet.

HUO: About a micro-utopia.

ES: Yes, I think so. Andrea Branzi sent me a text where he says that we can only work on the micro-situations. That’s why I think the Dalai Lama enjoys a certain success. [Laughs] It’s got nothing to do with it, really, but classical Buddhist, not the institutional kind, had this idea of working on our micro-existence, on micro-gestures, micro-events.

HUO: In connection with what you’re saying, there’s also a text from 1988 devoted to houses, in which you describe these micro-entities that appear in every culture.

ES: Which of my texts was that?

HUO: The one in which you describe places you visited and the impression you got of them. Your description, which is very precise, shows there’s always someone who has developed houses by adapting to the given conditions, just as mushrooms adapt to a forest.

ES: It’s a situation that becomes clear if you travel. For instance, in Myanmar you see houses that clearly correspond to a definite world. At the same time, the environment determines the way the house is built. If there’s a stream and the women have to fetch water, then the house is built near the stream. I could give plenty of other examples. Now, we split up, and I met another lady, Barbara Radice, and she has a lot to say about cooking—how it’s done. She talks a lot about it. There are pleasant houses where they hang a sheet of corn over the door for good luck. Then there are bank buildings that have massive doors that overawe you, so when you go and ask them for money, they make you wait and you feel this kind of impossibility, this thing I call destiny, something inevitable.

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HUO: How do you see the question of housing in the city?

ES: As long as humanity goes on growing at the rate we’re growing now, the distance between the person and another is going to grow bigger, like the distance between one place and another. So this idea that we can go from house to house on foot as one did in the Middle Ages, or the idea of the piazza—they just get lost. People living in a group of houses all gather in a kind of outdoor salon or square. The piazza—that’s simply unattainable nowadays.

In Milan, I only ever visit one or two districts, that’s all. All of us living in big cities just really live in one or two districts.

HUO: But what about the subway system?

ES: True, but if one of the young women who works in my office says she has to leave home at 7 a.m. because she has to be here at 8, I instinctively feel, “Poor thing!” In New York, it’s even worse, because you have a two-hour train ride every morning and two hours every evening to get home. You get home and your house stands in the middle of a garden, but it’s no use, because when you get home you have to bathe the whiskey to get over the traveling, and that’s no solution either. We all know about American and English garden cities, but you get home so shattered from hours of committing that you no longer feel the house belongs to you. You ask me what I think about the problems of the city, but I don’t know what to answer. I’ve often asked myself how I would conceivably run a city. We worked on a master plan in Korea, a project for the layout of an urban area around Seoul’s big international airport, one of the biggest in Asia. There’s a lot of competition in airports, between Japan, Korea, China.

HUO: Because they’ll soon be having the World Cup.

ES: Perhaps, but at present there’s also competition for business. To build this airport [in Korea], they filled in the sea between two islands. For 10 years they’d been unloading soil from one island and another, and they as asked us to put forward some ideas for a master plan. The project grew out of this. We asked ourselves, “What should we do in a place like this?” The only thing we could think of was to lay out some big express roads running through the center of the city and some other minor roads—first semi-private and then private—that became increasingly convenient for people to use, easier for children, for women. We laid out big pedestrian precincts linked by express roads. This is not such an unusual concept after all; it was one of Le Corbusier’s ideas. We also thought—but I guess it was an ideological utopia—we would create a city without ghettos, to avoid having a working-class zone, a middle-class zone, and a zone for the rich. We thought that these different zones should overlap. But I repeat: I don’t know whether this can really be achieved.

Anyway, we proposed a form of zoning to prevent what happened in Beverly Hills, where there are big chic areas with peaceful streets that simply have no connection with the outer city. I feel we have to think a bit more carefully about these situations. In short, planning is a makeshift science!

HUO: In a text of yours I read, you describe an imaginary journey through your drawings, and you speak of an archive. I’d really like to see this place. The text also speaks of a cupboard as a mysterious, scented place.

ES: Yes, I once wrote about this cupboard where I keep all the paints, the papers, my instruments for drawing, and whenever it’s opened, it gives off a wonderful perfume.

HUO: What about the archive?

ES: Some time ago I published a book of photos with an English publisher, Thames & Hudson, titled The Curious Mr. Settara. There’s also an edition in French. For the occasion of its release, about five years ago, I began to organize my photo archive better. I’ve almost finished.

HUO: What’s the importance behind this concept of traveling?

ES: Well, curiosity. There’s an almost paradigmatic form of curiosity to see what’s on the other side of the fence and also the urge to see if some things are confirmed or not confirmed. It’s true. But actually I believe you travel to confirm your ideas, and whatever you can’t confirm you discard as you travel. In a certain sense, you redesign yourself when you’re traveling. But then there was a moment when I felt the need to get away from Italian provincialism, even European provincialism.

HUO: During these trips, did you meet any artists and intellectuals?

ES: Sometimes I did, sometimes not. I went to Japan a number of times and always met architects. On one of my trips to India, I stayed with [painter] Francesco Clemente at his place for a month, and I learned a lot there: for instance, this idea of accepting the corruption of things, the destruction of things, as destiny. I learned that in India, because they see now and used to care in the least if things wear out. They have a much more sensible idea of life. Life wears out, you grow old and wear out, marble wears out, roads change and this is a concept Western culture tries to avoid. We repaint the house, we keep things repaired—everything has to look new all the time, everything has to be under control. That kind of suppleness the Indians have, the fact that problems of this kind don’t exist for them, strikes me as wonderful. All this is very obvious in India, a man who is not just a painter but a thinker. At any rate he paints amid this permanent uncertainty, awaiting this destruction.

HUO: Can we go back to the question I asked you earlier, about your interest in other disciplines, the interdisciplinary approach so obvious in your work? One thing that comes out in your texts is the experience—or rather the attempt—to found the Global Tools design school.

ES: It’s not that I founded it. I was part of the Archizoom Group with Andrea Branzi, plus some other people, especially some young Florentines. In Florence in the early 70s, there were some very aggressive groups that came from the political protests of ’68, and we were all but68 trying to find our role. We asked ourselves about the professional positions of designers in relation to industry. It was a period when I was hardly working any more. I no longer worked as a designer. I only worked for Olivetti because it was a rather special company. But it was there that I first refused to see myself as an industrial designer in the classic sense of the word.

HUO: Meaning opposition.

ES: Yes. In this context, we founded Global Tools, which lasted just a few months because the more extremist youngsters tried to destroy any intellectual operation. It was the period of Cultural Revolution in China, and they were dismissive of everything. This experience of ours didn’t last long. The idea was to create elements that had disappeared from design or had never been part of it.

HUO: Did you try to redesign some social aspects of the design profession?

ES: In a sense, yes. We hoped to have a gallery we could use to hold exhibitions, to present our work together, without too many constraints. In the end, we found a gallery, but the gallery owner happened to be a big stonemason, so those extremists objected, “We can’t work in this gallery because we’ll be conned by the stonemaking capitalist.”

HUO: In Global Tools, there always appeared this sense of resistance to priorities, to the exaggerated importance of the visual sense in our culture.

ES: More than the visual sense, it was resistance to the priority and the predominance of the intellect over the senses. The whole of Functionalism, as the word itself shows, was a hope that the intellect would succeed against Functionalism? —Gropius, Le Corbusier. and then huge tenement blocks in the outer city. I feel we have to think a bit more carefully about these situations. In short, planning is a makeshift science!

ES: Not against it. We tried to go beyond it. We were never against anyone. I come from the Functionalism school—Gropius, Le Corbusier. and then huge tenement blocks in the outer city. I feel we have to think a bit more carefully about these situations. In short, planning is a makeshift science!

ES: Yes. I think, for instance, that a museum of design is out of the question. It just can’t be done. An object has a value because we can touch it and use it. Even a museum of architecture is a space where you can walk. You pass through it, you touch it, you see the light. I really believe a museum of applied design done like the few I’ve seen is pointless. They generally take a razor and put it on a pedestal. But a razor isn’t a sculpture, it’s a razor. Even a chair is a chair, and you have to sit on it. So there’s a big difficulty in doing a design museum.

The same is true with a contemporary art museum. Conceptual art comes out strangely in a museum. You go there and see a white room with a line and you say, “Heck, is that meant to be strange?” At times, I think museums ought to be enormous, underground, gigantic archives, with the part the public visits just putting on temporary exhibitions that closely reflect what is happening outside, historical changes, etc.

HUO: So, underground, there’d be an infinite archive, and above, changing appearances?

ES: Each person would visit the museum a number of times because every exhibition would be different. I don’t think there’s much interest in museums conceived the way the museums of institutional representation.