

Hans Ulrich Obrist

Art Curator

'I believe art can change the world'

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Hans Ulrich Obrist believes that as a curator he is a 'junction maker' who brings art works together, brings artists together, brings people together.

What does spirituality mean to you?

To be with art is all we ask, dixit Gilbert & Goerge.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

I grew up in a Swiss Protestant family but it was only very loosely religious. I channeled all the major existential questions –of life, death etc.- through art. I actually came to them through art.

Was art omnipresent in your life since childhood?

Mostly since adolescence. I grew up in Switzerland with a very rich and varied artistic context, many exhibitions, many collections and museums. I was always magnetically attracted to it. My parents had nothing to do with the arts and nobody knew where this obsession had come from, but they supported it.

Did you ever feel the need to create art?

I never did. From the beginning I was magnetically attracted to it. At 17, I began meeting artists such as Christian Boltanski, Fischli/Weiss, Gerhart Richter. And I decided I wanted my life to be about working with great artists. I therefore came to the idea of becoming a curator.

A curator brings art works together, brings artists together, brings people together. A curator builds bridges. He is a 'junction maker'.

At the beginning it was a rather marginal activity. People simply didn't know what being a curator means. It is only in the last five or six years that it has entered the mainstream and has become recognized in society. All of a sudden the word 'curating' is used all over the blog sphere and the web; every website is curated.

Curating is not only about producing but also about selecting. I have never produced my own artwork. I have selected works, brought works together and produced works of other people.

My model and hero in this is the Russian impresario Diaghilev. He never produced anything on his own, but he brought dancers, artists, choreographers, composers – Stravinsky, Picasso, Nijinsky etc. - into what became the legendary Ballets Russes.

So it is about being a catalyst, a conduit?

Yes, it is about being a catalyst, an interaction maker, a facilitator. To curate comes from the Latin word 'curare', which means to take care of. In the 19th century curating used to mean being a caretaker of objects in a museum, and it still is one aspect of my work. But I see an extended notion of art. I work with all the arts, engaging with visual artists, novelists, poets, architects. It is important for me to be a bridge not only between artists, or between artists and the public, but also between all those disciplines.

And also between art and science?

Yes, that is the next step. We are somehow a two culture system with the arts and humanities on one hand, & hard sciences on the other. Yet, I have always believed in a third culture idea, in developing a third space. A great model is John Brockman and his www.edge.org.

When looking at the way your life evolved, has it been all by chance, or is there such a thing as destiny and preordained elements in life?

It is a bit like going on a walk.

I was very inspired by the Swiss writer Robert Walser, who stopped writing at some point and just went on endless walks.

When you go on a walk, you may have a certain route in mind, but you never know what you will actually see, and you may change the route along the way. I've always had a clear path shaped by my obsession with art, but I didn't really know where it would lead. It's been both a determined and an open system. The determination is about producing exhibitions and events with artists; the openness is that it always leads to new encounters, new geographies, which can't ever be predicted. Chance is definitely part of it, but it is a form of controlled chance.

You like the word 'flannerie' – walking and stumbling upon things?

Yes, very much so. As a kid, I went on night trains all over Europe. Then, little by little, I became aware that art was much bigger than just Western art and went on researching it in China, India, the Middle East, Latin America, taking into account this amazing polyphony of centers.

I've had different periods in my life. Between 1986 and 2000, I was on the road 250 to 300 days a year. In that sense, I was a permanent 'flâneur'. Then in 2000 I decided I ought to have a fixed office – first it was Paris then London – with office hours, from Monday to Friday. On weekends I do my research all over the world, so I have 52 trips a year. This was 2000 to 2010. It may all lead to a third phase – I do not know. We are always on a journey into the unknown, aren't we?

I actually think we are in a post-planning condition. There should be a necessity, a big driving force, but no masterplan. For some reason, from the beginning, I have always approached my life and my work from the belief that this could be my last day. Why do we dare assume that this is not our last day? We need to live in a mode of urgency. And so, I want to get everything done, which makes me quite productive. I constantly push to finish a book or a show. Then I move to the next one, and the next one, with the constant belief that it could be the last one.

Doesn't that permanent sense of urgency create constant inner tension?

Not really. I would rather say it creates a productive tension.

On that journey, does the concept of a larger force, or God talk to you?

For me, that larger force is art. I think art is the highest form of belief. And the highest form of hope as Gerhard Richter said.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I really believe art can change the world. So I would choose to work with artists again. But if it couldn't be the case, I would choose to be a novelist, or an urbanist, or I would go into politics, which are different ways of impacting reality. Basically, no matter what field it would be, it would have to be about changing the world.

If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

I would ask what I always ask in my interviews: what are your unrealized projects? Which projects were too big to realize? And also, which project did you self-censure? What didn't you dare do?

What about you, what didn't you dare do?

I didn't dare write a novel, because I think my writing skills are too limited. And I haven't dared found my own museum, my own structure. I have always worked in existing institutions. Maybe it wasn't the right time yet. My own institution would be a trans-disciplinary one, with science, architecture, literature, music, visual arts.

What is your idea of happiness?

To work. I never stop. Because I do what I want to do. I don't need a holiday. I would only need a holiday if I were doing something I don't like. What I like and what is necessary I do all the time. There is no Christmas, no New Year's. It is the don't-stop principle.

Do you ever have a sense of inner contentment?

I am on a mission, I have to do what I have to do.