Hans Ulrich Obrist: Curating in the Twenty First Century

Peter Fischli, David Weiss, Christian Boltanski, and I thought—since I had only books in my kitchen—that we should get rid of the books and put food into the kitchen. This episode marks my curatorial debut. The exhibition lasted for three months and had thirty visitors, so it was not a public success, but it became a rumor. Lots of artists joined the project over time, including Richard Wentworth, who doubled the sink and called it World Soup. We had Boltanski projecting a candle, while Hans-Peter Feldmann thought it was boring to do an exhibition only in the kitchen. He wanted to exhibit in the fridge, so we had an exhibition within the exhibition: the fridge exhibition included marble eggs and feathers with visitors exploring the fridge of the show. And this kind of intimate exhibition was the first exhibition I did. For me every show has to be like “The Kitchen” show, with the excitement of beginning.

For me, in particular, the idea of making exhibitions in very small environments is very important, especially in relation to the practice of curating in the twenty-first century, which has on the contrary a lot to do with very large curatorial projects. The venues for which I am being proposed as curator, and for which all curators are being proposed, are bigger and bigger. So many museums have expanded, and museum architecture has become more and more monumental. It is very interesting that if you go to nineteenth-century museums—for example the other day I was looking at the museum in Winterthur and at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen—they are very often tiny spaces. The Boijmans has spaces that are no bigger than my kitchen. More and more in contemporary museums, there is a sort of standardized size—there are no longer small spaces. As a curatorial continuum, every year or every second year since “The Kitchen,” I have done a house-museum exhibition.

The last show of this kind that I curated was held in Federico García Lorca’s house in Granada. In a similar way to “The Kitchen,” I invited artists to this tiny house, and nothing has really changed. Rivane Neuenschwander installed a typewriter; Gilbert & George lied in bed covered by a type of bird that was in the park outside the house; under the bed was a little micro-theater by Bestué and Vives; Christina Iglesias doubled the room with organic growth and a cast of the room in the room. The exhibition started with Cy Twombly telling me in a meeting in Rome that it is important that we bring poetry together with visual art again, and his work Verde que te quiero verde is basically a drawing he made in homage to Lorca. Franz West participated with a sculpture, which is a monument for Lorca. We must also remember that obviously Lorca died very tragically, having been assassinated near the house, which is also the last house he inhabited. In his work placed in the kitchen, Pedro Reyes gathered all the verses of Lorca’s poetry that use the word “water.” Neuenschwander provided an alphabet, and visitors were invited to write their own poems. Anri Sala realized a photographic homage to Lorca, and Sarah Morris presented a painting of a tile, very much connecting the Lorca house to other buildings in Granada. Koo Jeong-A did a replica in a smaller size of Lorca’s suit. Philippe Parreno’s homage to Lorca consisted of a breath of air that is forever cast into the glass. So these house exhibitions are somehow archipelagos or, rather, “kind of” one island.

At a certain moment I started to be invited to do bigger exhibitions. My first bigger exhibition was with Kasper König in “The Broken Mirror.” After having spent a great deal of time in intense dialogue with artists, König was one of the first museum professionals I met. From him I learned the craft of curating, how to do a book, and how to do an exhibition. He has done so many visionary large-scale shows. When we met he proposed that I make one of these large-scale shows in collaboration with him. I was very young at that moment. Suddenly, I went from
the small “The Kitchen” exhibit to working with a space of thousands and thousands of square meters. I then reacted to that in a sort of dialectic of big and small. After “The Broken Mirror” show had opened, I went to Paris and I repeated “The Kitchen” in a hotel room, because by that time I had become more nomadic and I no longer had an apartment. I lived in hotels. So I transformed a hotel room in Paris into my exhibition venue and I invited seventy artists. It was a big exhibition, but in a hotel room of ten square meters. That is where Glissant enters into the frame: Alighiero Boetti had told me to read Glissant—and he had also told me that I had to be less slow. So when I read Glissant, I started to think that maybe the large-scale exhibition could be an archipelago. We tried this out for the first time with Hou Hanru, on the occasion of “Cities on the Move,” an exhibition that took place at the Secession building in Vienna. The show was very much focused on Asia and the amazing artists and architects from that continent, as well as on cities and their permutations in Asia. It was the 100th anniversary of the building, and we wanted it to become a hub, a relais from where you could go all over the city and nd other fragments of “Cities on the Move.” Then, with the late Josef Ortner, the visionary founder of museum in progress, and his partner Katrin Messner, we did the “The Billboard Project.”

The exhibition became a traveling show, because, really, literally, every museum in Europe wanted to have an Asian exhibition. Almost none of these Asian artists and architects had shown and it became an incredible traveling circus. We felt that we could apply Glissant’s idea; we could actually play the game and enter the global dialogue, but we came up with a virus, which would actually shift the system and each time have a very different show. So “Cities on the Move” was completely different each time; it was not a show that has to go from A to B to C, but it became very much a timeline of growth, of organicity, of change.

The year after Vienna, the show went to London. Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren did the exhibition design, and they said, “In the middle there must be a chamber of torture of architecture,” so they wanted to really show this extraordinary, apocalyptic aspect of the sprawling architecture that exists all over Asia. Throughout the space there was a prowling serpent of Chen Zhen made out of lots and lots of cars. So the exhibition was really between an apotheosis and an apocalypse: on the one hand it was a very optimistic Asian moment in the 1990s, and on the other hand there were very apocalyptic moments described by artists and architects. It was also the beginning of the idea of architecture as production of reality and shows. In the 1990s, when the show went to the Hayward, we invited Shigeru Ban to do a paper-tube pavilion. “Cities on the Move” was an exhibition in permanent transformation; it was not a representation of a city, but it became City, a performative space. It is important to remember the collaboration of Cedric Price and Surasi Kusolwong, which realized an implicitly participatory zone with lots of magazines: a sort of a lounge, which included all of the magazines of Asia, which at the time were not connected to each other. Cedric Price and Surasi Kusolwong worked on this kiosk with us, and we linked all of the magazines to each other. We connected Seoul to Tokyo, to Beijing and Shanghai. It is obviously interesting because it was not only a polyphonic exhibition of an archipelago, but also a “polyphony of cities” in Asia and no longer a quest for an absolute center. If in the twentieth century New York famously stole the avant-garde from Paris, again in the quest for an absolute center, in the 1990s it became clear that we had hundreds of cities existing as centers of the avant-garde.

Now obviously there are many different ways in which curating in the twenty-first century may happen, and I always felt that Joseph Beuys talked about an expanded notion of art (der erweiterte Kunstbegriff). Art never follows curating; curating has to follow art, and if curating follows art then an expanded notion of art necessarily leads to an expanded notion of curating.
And it was in conversations with artists of Beuys’s generation—like Alighiero Boetti, Christian Boltanski, and Gilbert & George—that it became clear to me that we needed an expanded notion of curating for our time. Boetti told me that we needed to really go beyond the museum, we needed art in new forms. He used to say: “It’s very boring, we are always invited to do the same things, to do Biennale exhibitions, gallery shows, museum shows...” So that’s where the dialogue with museum in progress with Josef Ortner started, and led us to produce for example a piece with tens of thousands of puzzles, which were like a planetary exhibition of Dante Alighieri carried all over the world. We also produced Douglas Gordon’s Cinema is Dead, Raise the Dead: large-scale electronic paintings—computer-generated paintings by artists—which cover entire buildings.

After “Cities on the Move,” I started to think a lot about what could be an archipelago-esque large-scale exhibition, and at that point Julia Peyton-Jones and I started our collaboration at the Serpentine Gallery in London. We believe that it is a kind of an interesting thing, because if one thinks about the 1990s, the promiscuity of collaboration between curators was the big change in our generation. I think our pioneers—like Harald Szeemann, for example—were very much curators on their own, while in our generation there have been permanent constellations of collaborations. So it was only logical that one could extrapolate the collaboration spirit of the epoch to the way of running an art institution—Julia always says: “One plus one is eleven!” It is incredibly interesting when two people run an art institution together: it creates a dynamic, and since the Serpentine is a small space, we started to think it would be very interesting if instead we used the biggest space in London by having an exhibition at Battersea Power Station. We also decided that we wanted to introduce Chinese artists at the exhibition: there had never been a show at that time in London on Chinese art and architecture of the new generation, so we occupied the space with artists and architects for the occasion of the exhibition “China Power Station.” Huang Yong Ping, for example, was inspired by these spaces and created his first video installation, where one can see animals watching a video of themselves. Marcel Broodthaers said that we usually create exhibitions where there is only one possibility surrounded by other possibilities, and if we invite the artists to do things in unexpected circumstances—in a kitchen, or in a gigantic power station—then works are born in a completely new form and concept. Gu Dexin, a very fascinating artist of the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s—did one of his last installations at this exhibition by using tons of apples to produce a million-apple cider wall, which led the space of the Battersea Power Station with the smell of cider. Another important aspect is related to the way the moving images of many Chinese filmmakers were presented in the gigantic spaces of the Battersea Power Station; they were sort of raining through the roof. In thousands of square meters we could show long sequences of installations and, since artists could have many screens, it was possible to develop a kind of a promenade, a space one could walk through. Among different documentary films, we exhibited Qiu Anxiong’s animation films, and the pavilions of Toyo Ito, initially created for the Serpentine Pavilion, became the shop and café of the exhibition.

The next exhibition that somehow tried to become a traveling show, in the sort of spirit of “Cities on the Move” as a complex dynamic system that would grow, was “Indian Highway.” We felt very urgently, and very para-doXically as well, that London had completely neglected contemporary art from India—there had not been any shows of Indian art, and there had not been any focus on it. Along with the Astrup Fearnley Museet for Moderne Kunst, we invited Indian artists and architects to actually develop an exhibition, which would start in the Serpentine and then become an ever-growing exhibition. We invited M. F. Husain to exhibit his paintings outside, and Nikolaus Hirsch—who is not only the Dean of the Frankfurt Städelschule, but who also has an
architecture practice both in Frankfurt and in Delhi—to develop the exhibition’s display of Indian Highway. It was Richard Hamilton who once told me: “We only remember exhibitions that also develop a display feature,” so I have always had an inclination to invite artists and architects to develop display features for exhibitions. Moreover, it is interesting to notice—if we look at few examples such as the wall painting of N. S. Harsha, Sheela Gowda’s architectural space within the space, and Dayanita Singh’s particular urban wallpaper—that even ten years earlier, with “Cities on the Move,” the topic of the city was present. Ranjit Hoskote, poet and commissioner of the Indian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011, said that maybe the concept of the city is connected to the big roots of India. The Raqs Media Collective said something similar, i.e. to focus not on cities, but on what happens between the cities. This can be related to what happened in June 2011 in Perugia, where Stefano Boeri launched his amazing Festival of Knowledge, which was a “festival of knowledge production about the city”; more and more of the architects and urbanists say that what is interesting is not the city, but rather what is interesting is what is happening in between geographies—it is the roots, the song-lines, the pathways, and what happens between the city and the countryside in all these blasts and diffusions. So out of this logic we said that it is not an exhibition about Indian cities, but it is about the Indian highway, about what is happening in between. And that also leads us to the “Edgware Road Project.” If you think about the Indian highway, the road, it can become interesting that we declare an entire street an exhibition; exhibitions can become a form of urbanism. That is interesting because at the beginning of my practice I was very inspired by Yona Friedman and Cedric Price and by their idea of urbanism, which I brought it into the art world and into exhibitions, and now I think more and more that it is important that we think of curating as a form of urbanism.

Carsten Höller and I have a plan to build a city together in Tunisia, and this curatorial project is meant to be a new town. At the Serpentine, after having explored China and India, we wanted to focus on the Middle East. We decided not only to question that notion of the Middle East, as a lot of artists are very uncomfortable with that description, but also to try to find a neologism that describes the region. After the Battersea Power Station project, we came up with the idea of taking over an entire street, and that is why we started the collaboration with the Edgware Road in London, located near the Serpentine Gallery, just a few hundreds meters away. The Edgware Road has layers and layers of history involving the Middle East. Egyptian film has had a very important presence there in the form of an Egyptian cinema, and there were many links to Beirut, along with many restaurants and other spaces with connections to the Middle East over many decades. So we decided to invite artists like Susan Hefuna, Waël Shawky, and others to actually develop a residency in Edgware Road. The artists would spend time, map the Edgware Road in relation to Beirut, Cairo, and other cities, and little by little this project will become an exhibition. For the moment, it is a residency. Sally Tallant, who is the Serpentine’s Head of Programmes, has been very much driving this project, along with an extraordinary team. A good example to call up is Marwan Rechmaoui, an artist from Beirut, with his mappings of Beirut and of the Edgware Road.

We can say that the aforementioned projects are about knowledge production. Similarly to when I do a show in a house, like the Lorca house, artists come and work there, and reconvert spaces. Another example that comes to mind is the “Utopia Station,” which was a hybrid work space, or the hybrid work space of the 1st Berlin Biennale we constructed for documenta X of Catherine David, where we invited Christoph Schlingensief. What I really wanted to stress here is the idea of the hybrid work space. The Edgware Road program was a hybrid workspace, while obviously the Serpentine Gallery’s core exhibitions continued nearby in the white cube, where numerous shows were organized with prominent artists such as Matthew Barney, Jeff
Koons, Philippe Parreno, Inside/Outside, It Started to Snow, Konstantin Grcic, Klara Lidén, and Nairy Baghramian, to give a few examples.

And last but not least, it is worth it to introduce the experience of the Serpentine’s pavilions. Julia Peyton-Jones had a wonderful idea in 2000 to invent, with Zaha Hadid, the pavilions. The idea is that every summer, we add a wing. Usually once architecture is built it is frozen, but in this case we add a new wing every summer. Julia Peyton-Jones and I started to collaborate in 2006, and since then have co-curated the project. The first one we did together was with Rem Koolhaas and Cecil Balmond. I had invented an idea of “marathons” in Stuttgart and also in Zagreb: the idea was to map a city by having interviews, events, and discourse nonstop for twenty-four hours. This idea did not launch very well, because when we did the first marathon in Stuttgart, the then new museum leaked tragically—somehow at two o’clock in the morning I was just about to have a conversation with Ute Meta Bauer when we were inundated and suddenly rescued from the flooded building. The “Marathon Format” soon developed into a very regular activity, occurring every summer in London, and now also in other cities of the world. With Rem Koolhaas, for example, we did a twenty-four-hour nonstop interview marathon: a portrait of London with artists and architects. Many marathons were organized under the project “Experiment Marathon,” like the poetry marathon in SANAA’s pavilion or the manifesto marathon in Frank Gehry pavilion, which played on the idea of the Hyde Park Corner, the proximity to Hyde Park Corner, free speech in our neighborhood, and questioning others’ statements and manifestos in the twenty-first century. Tino Sehgal states that manifestos are a very masculine thing, a twentieth-century thing, while the twenty-first century is more about conversation.

However, they are somehow manifestoes and, as Tom McCarthy says, “if the manifesto is a defining form” it is interesting because we can revisit it almost like a broken bicycle wheel. At the end, there were seventy artists presenting manifestos of all kinds, from the worlds of literature, design, science, philosophy, music, and film.

The marathon that has the most to do with the topic of the conference prose was organized in 2007 with Olafur Eliasson in Kjetil Thorsen’s pavilion, which is designed as a laboratory. The idea of the “exhibition as a laboratory” is something that has always played a big role in my activity. I believe that we need laboratories for the twenty-first century. We once did an exhibition called Laboratorium with Barbara Vanderlinden, where the entire city of Antwerp became a lab. With Olafur we declared the pavilion a zone of laboratories, inviting about sixty practitioners to do experiments in public. For example, Simone Forti did scores that were performed by Gill Clarke, and Cerith Wyn Evans did a choreographic experiment; there were many science experiments and obviously experiments can fail when you move an experiment from one place to the next. Talking about failure nowadays, I think, is extremely relevant. Some of those experiments produced very unexpected results. Marina Abramovic’ did several experiments with visitors; Spartacus Chetwynd revisited Buckminster Fuller’s experiments at the Black Mountain College with geodesics; Peter Cook (who would say “my suitcase is an experiment”) unpacked his suitcase, like someone who has just arrived, placing the contents on the table as an experiment; Pedro Reyes started to literally rope in the entire audience, who then encountered huge problems freeing themselves; and Thomas Saraceno and Tris Vonna-Michell developed a lecture as a kind of experiment. There were many scholars, Gustav Metzger’s experiment with metallic ropes, experiments involving animals, and conversations with animals. Fia Backström also performed an experimental lecture. There was a séance as an experiment, and the idea of color as an experiment: Are there color theories for the twenty-first century? Jonas Mekas revisited the Andy Warhol Factory by analyzing it as a zone of experiment; the collaboration with John Brockman and EDGE led to the “Formular of the 21st Century.”
More about the marathons is available on the website of the Serpentine Gallery, and for those linked to science, it is published on the EDGE website and on John Brockman’s site for the scientific experiments he curated, involving a number of contemporary scientists and biologists like Armand Le Roi and Steve Jones, as well as Lewis Wolpert. At some point in the middle of the science experiments of John Brockman, we invited John Baldessari to do his wonderful experiment: to transform a glass of water into a glass of wine, and back into a glass of water. And maybe mention of this experiment is a good way to end...