

The Curator is Present - [Ex]changing Roles of Curator and Artist: Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović

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ABSTRACT

To what extent do the lives and works of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović reveal the changing roles of curators and artists since the 1960s? Can the performance of *The Curator Is Present* be seen as an example of an exchange of these roles? The works of Obrist and Abramović, especially some of their printed conversations (Abramović & Obrist, 2010), Abramović's video-portrait of Obrist *The Curator Is Present* (Abramović, 2010), and the observations of their colleagues, in many disciplines, not just the art world, show the extent of the exchange and expandability of the roles of curator and artist. This brief review of some elements of the lives and works of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović investigates the traditional and contemporary roles of curator and artist. Furthermore it reveals the extent to which these roles are being changed in the field of Contemporary Art.

Keywords: Curator, Artist, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Marina Abramović

1. INTRODUCTION

I think that the attempt to find out what art is is really the permanent process. If we had an answer to this question, we'd probably stop (Obrist, 2011b, p. 37).

The two questions which I use as the basis for this essay are: To what extent do the lives and works of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović reveal the changing roles of curators and artists since the 1960s? Can the performance *The Curator Is Present* be seen as an example of an exchange of these roles?

A very valuable resource for answering these questions is a book Marina Abramović and Hans Ulrich Obrist published in which eight of their conversations were printed as part of Obrist's Conversation Series (Abramović & Obrist, 2010). During some of these interviews Abramović talks as a matter of course about her different experiences in curating. These interviews partly answer the question of whether an exchange of roles between artists and curators is possible, as it is a matter of fact that Abramović and other artists have already worked and continue to work in the field of curating quite regularly. Thus, the question of whether Marina Abramović's video-portrait of Hans Ulrich Obrist *The Curator Is Present* can be seen as such an exchange is more or less redundant, since there are even more distinctive examples than Abramović's work in the field of curating. Still, the lives and works of Obrist and Abramović offer such a variety of fascinating aspects that taking a closer look at them opens a whole new view of the exchange and the expandability of the roles of artist and curator.

The search for the answer to the question of what art is (q.v. Obrist, 2011b, p. 37) and the search to find out who Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović really are and what their roles as curator and artist include, are ongoing. This re-

view of these two magnificent individuals of the contemporary art world is part of that ongoing process and part of my search for what art is.

2. OF CURATOR AND ARTIST

2.1 Definition of Curator and Curator's Relation to Artist

If one looks at the Latin origin of the word *curator*, the traditional area of this profession becomes quite clear. The meaning of *cura* is to care for or to maintain something. Further connotations include to decorate and/or to clean something. This presents the curator as a caretaker, conservator, guardian and custodian (Stowasser, Petschening & Skutsch, 1980; Pertsch, 1983).

The very basic role of the curator is to take care. Taking care, however, requires something or someone that needs to be cared for. Hans Ulrich Obrist defines the curator as "the caretaker of objects in a museum" (TEDx Talks, 2011, 00:11ff.). This not only defines the role of the curator but also names the object of care as being objects in a museum. *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art* (West, 1996) gives a further definition of the curator and the objects of care, saying that the curator "investigates works of art" (West, 1996, p. 367) and furthermore "their appearance and relationship with each other" (West, 1996, p. 367). According to this definition taking care is described as a process of investigation and the objects to be investigated are works of art. Apart from the caretaking and the objects, *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art's* definition also mentions other important factors of the curator's work: the members of an audience, the making of decisions concerning the way the works of art are displayed (often in a gallery space) and the responsibility for signage and interpretation in labels and catalogues.

Von Bismarck summarizes these factors clearly in her essay *Haltloses Ausstellen: Politiken des künstlerischen Kuratierens*. For her the basis of

curating is simply creating connections between objects, people, places, and contexts (Von Bismarck, 2006).

Combining the origin of the word curator and the above-mentioned definitions of Obrist, *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art* and Von Bismarck, the role of the curator is to take care by investigating or creating connections with and among four factors: 1) objects (in a museum, works of art), 2) people (the audience), 3) places (museum, gallery space, exhibition space), and 4) contexts (interpretation, catalogues).

Unfortunately *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art* does not specifically mention any people other than the audience nor does Von Bismarck give any detailed annotations to people. However, one very important aspect is missing: the objects themselves – without which the curator would have no purpose, as there would be nothing to take care of – would not exist without the person who creates them, the artist.

The origin of the word curator alludes to the fact that, in the relationship between the artist and the curator, there is no chicken or egg question of which came first. An artist can form pieces of art without compulsorily needing a second person to take care of his or her work. However, a caretaker needs something or someone to take care of. Thus the existence of curators is clearly dependent on the existence of artists and their artwork. This is why the second factor of curating, people, should include not only the audience but also the artist.

2.2 Changing Roles and the Consequent Change of Relation

However, Obrist and Von Bismarck both observe that massive changes within the art world have led to a redefinition of curating that goes beyond its original meaning. Even if the beginning of this change cannot be seen in one particular event or one person, Obrist and Von Bismarck each

highlight individual events that they emphasize as important markers in the development of the present day definition of curator and curating.

According to Obrist “curating always follows art, it’s not the other way around” (TEDx Talks, 2011, 01:10ff.). As the caretaker depends on the object and the curator on the artist’s work, curating compulsorily has to follow art. Seeing this as a fundamental idea of curating, Obrist explains that in the 1960s Joseph Beuys developed the idea of the *erweiteter Kunstbegriff* (“expanded notion of art”), which in Obrist’s opinion had to lead to an expanded notion of curating as well (TEDx Talks 2011). Thus, curating following art includes the fact that a change in art such as the expanded notion of art forces curating to change or to expand.

Beuys’ extended notion of art takes art out of the ivory tower and brings it right into life itself (Harlan et al, 1984). If curating follows art, this leads to the idea that curating and curators follow art into all different kinds of areas. Through the extended notion of art and the resulting extended notion of curating, all four basic factors of curating (objects, people, places and contexts) receive a completely new dynamic dimension.

However, before taking a closer look at this new idea of the extended notion of art, other factors which lead to the change must be identified. Along with Obrist, Von Bismarck also sees two essential developments in the (late) 1960s. The first was the rise of Conceptual Art and the second the formation of a new occupational group: the freelance or independent curator.

Von Bismarck points out that Conceptual Art moved art from object-centered to idea-centered, which seriously changed the relationship of author, (art)work and audience. One of the consequences of this approach was to add the choosing, putting together, presenting, and communicating or explaining pieces of art to the work of the

artist. These processes all used to be associated with or belong to the field of the curator or curating. The overlap of working areas means that the roles of artist and curator are no longer separated as clearly as they used to be. Through Conceptual Art, artists have begun to work in what has traditionally been the field of curators. Conversely, as will be shown below, curators have begun to approach their work in a way that tends to be seen as artistic.

Parallel to the rapidly increasing activities in the field of art in the 1960s, a new occupational group of independent curators developed. Here Harald Szeemann can be seen as a prototype. In 1995 Obrist interviewed Szeemann. This interview was first published in *Artforum* in February 1996 and included an introductory text written by Obrist where he describes his colleague:

*Ever since he “declared his independence” by resigning his directorship at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, Harald Szeemann has defined himself as an *Ausstellungsmacher*, a maker of exhibitions (Obrist, 2011a, p. 80).*

Furthermore Von Bismarck and Obrist both see Szeemann’s version of *Documenta* (exhibition of modern and contemporary art, organized every five years in Kassel, Germany) in 1972 as an important historical event for the change in the roles of curators and artists. Szeemann was the first director of *Documenta* who gave the exhibition an overall topic or theme that participating artists had to follow (Von Bismarck, 2006). He indirectly steered the artists’ works in a particular direction, or simply chose only those who followed the topic.

This dramatic change in the art world was driven by a number of factors. In particular, the expanded notion of art, Conceptual Art, and the movement towards a new occupational group of freelance curators were key issues in the devel-

opment of today’s definition of a curator. They illustrate the movement in art since the 1960s, Beuys and Szeemann being only two examples who gave this development momentum.

In one of his speeches for *TEDx*, Obrist describes the present day definition of curating:

Today it is much much more than filling a space with objects. It has to do with filtering, it has to do with enabling, it has to do with synthesizing, with framing, also with remembering; and it’s definitely become clear, sort of seeing the exponential growth of the use of the note curator on the internet, that the proliferation of ideas, of information, of images needs somehow, obviously, a guiding and it seems also that within this whole information explosion curating is used more and more (TEDx Talks, 2011, 00:11ff).

He further says that the words curator and curating are now used in much wider fields than they used to be; that booklists on Amazon are being curated, as well as pages in magazines and concept stores. He also mentions that Chris Anderson calls himself the curator of *TED* and that even conferences are being curated. Obrist comes to the conclusion that “curating goes far beyond the museum” (*TEDx Talks*, 2011, 01:00ff.). Parallel to Obrist’s conclusion, Von Bismarck says that since the 1990s both artists and curators produce concepts for exhibitions and the boundaries of the traditionally separated professional areas are being expanded. Here she sees a chance for a breakthrough in new artistic approaches.

As mentioned above, the dimension of the four factors of curating, objects, people, places and contexts, has changed immensely throughout the last 50 years. Conceptual Art suddenly enabled art to become non-object focused. The objects the curator should take care of broadened from paintings and sculptures to include many differ-

ent forms of art, from ideas, realized or unrealized, to happenings and performances.

Through social developments both inside and outside the art world the people, both audiences and artists, have changed over the years. The variety of places where art is exhibited have exploded, leaving the museum, and in the case of exhibitions curated by Obrist, moving into a kitchen, airplane cabins, a monastery library, a sewage treatment plant, and a vitrine in a restaurant in the Swiss Alps, as well as into an online exhibition helping viewers to perform artists' works on their own (Obrist, 2011b).

These far-reaching changes in all four factors of curating, combined with the dramatic changes in art, have driven changes in the role of the curator as well as the role of the artist. The following projects of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović will illustrate the multifaceted possibilities and varieties of the work of a curator and an artist.

3. HANS ULRICH OBRIST–REINVENTING THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR

Hans Ulrich Obrist was born in May 1968 in Zurich, Switzerland. He studied sociology, political science and economics and then found his way into the art world. After spending time with the artist duo Fischli/Weiss and watching them work on their film *The Way Things Go*, Obrist had conversations with Christian Boltanski and met Gerhard Richter for the first time. He started to work more directly with visual art and curated his first, unspectacular exhibition in his own kitchen in 1991. Obrist invited a handful of artists to participate. Fischli/Weiss's contribution was a constructed altar made of oversized groceries. About thirty people saw the show. One of these 30 was Jean de Loisy from the Cartier Foundation who then invited Obrist to live in Paris and work there as a curator. This encounter and the follow-

ing developments can be seen as the beginning of Obrist's career in the field of curating. After the exhibition in his kitchen Obrist became a world-renowned curator within a year (Obrist, 2011b).

Amongst other positions, he has been the curator of the *Museum in Progress*, Vienna from 1993 to 2000, and the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris* from 2000 to 2006. Since 1991 Obrist has curated over 150 exhibitions and festivals internationally (Obrist & Eliasson, 2008).

Obrist himself describes his main work as curating, with a parallel focus on research and knowledge production that, amongst others, is represented through his interview project. A number of friends, artists, fellow curators, scientists and architects described him in the context of interviews or statements. One of them is Rem Koolhaas, who said that,

The omnipresent Swiss-born curator and irrepressible interrogator (...) is a man who has made conversation itself into an art form, who has a ravenous appetite for his subjects, and an uncanny knack for teasing out those sparkling and unexpected details, raw and uncensored. (...) [His] curatorial eye has transformed the possibilities of the white-walled gallery (Obrist, 2011b, p. 70).

In the following sections some of Obrist's projects are described, projects which can be seen as a basis of him reinventing the role of the curator. Obrist continually searches for modalities in art that go beyond objecthood, following the expanded notion of art and its detachment from its material origins. His issue is that the traditional exhibition format focuses on the static human-to-object-relation, which lacks dynamism and the interpersonal. He goes beyond taking care of objects in a museum by building up a huge network of people inside and outside the art world all over the planet, seeing "bringing people together"

(Obrist, 2011b, p. 34) as a basis of his work and realizing what appear to be crazy ideas. He sees inventing new formats as part of his practice of exhibitions and above all, during his hyperactive work rhythm he never seems to lose the basis for his striving: his passion for art (Obrist, 2011b).

3.1 Dusting off Traditional Ideas—The Hyper Early Club, the Brutally Early Club and the Art & Brain Conference

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the salons were places where people, belonging mostly to the middle and upper class, met to exchange ideas in the area of literature, politics, music and art. As part of his job of “bringing people together” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 34), Obrist mentions that he “always wanted to make salons for the twenty-first century. That is my great goal” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 34).

In 1999 Obrist created a small salon at the Elephant & Castle in London, where weekly conversations and exhibitions took place. Ten years later he talked about adding a new dimension to the salon idea. In 2009 Obrist and Tom McCarthy had a (public) conversation at the Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design, University of the Arts London. There they talked about a new idea Obrist developed as a 21st-century version of the salon: the *Hyper Early Club* and the *Brutally Early Club*. Some friends and Obrist were looking for a platform on which to exchange thoughts and to produce ideas in a different way. They decided that the best time to meet would be extremely early in the morning, as there is no traffic in the city at that time of day, plus nobody would have any conflicts in their schedule. Together with Markus Miessen, Obrist then founded the *Hyper Early Club* (which started at 3 a.m.) and the *Brutally Early Club* (starting at 6 a.m.) in London.

As a meeting point they chose Starbucks, as it was the only adequate location open at that time of day. Markus Miessen, a London and Berlin based

architect, who is also working on a high-alpine library and cultural center that will house the entire private archive and collection of Obrist, took the idea of the Club to Berlin (CSM, 2009).

This idea is one example of Obrist reinventing the role of a curator. He looks at a very traditional means of communication and a traditional platform of exchange, the salon, and transforms this idea into a 21st century version. He considers the practical factors that most of the people working in the art world have an overfilled schedule and that travelling through a city like London is time-consuming during rush hour. He finds a way of getting together with his friends and developing a dynamic forum for an exchange about art.

Another idea that Obrist brings to a new level is the basic idea of conferences. He talks about it in the same conversation mentioned above at the CSM with Tom MacCarthy:

My observation was that with conferences and symposiums the most important thing happens when, you know, in the coffee breaks, (...) not in the strange situation of being (...) on a stage (CSM, 2009, 41:50ff.).

He then follows this idea and says that it is interesting when this thought is pushed even further, which he first tried at the *Art & Brain* conference at the Jülich Science compound. Obrist and Ernst Pöppel invited renowned neuroscientists and artists to a big conference, including organized tickets, buses, and a conference hotel. They picked up the speakers from the airport and then, at the last minute, they cancelled the whole conference:

It created an incredible degree of confusion on all sides and also initially frustration. But it is actually, of all the conferences I have ever organised, the conference where most things happened (CSM, 2009, 43:00ff.).

He describes that they all made the best of it and that the artists and the scientists started to spend time with each other. The artists even visited the laboratories in the scientific center. For Obrist, major collaborations and books emerged from this conference (CSM, 2009).

3.2 Emphasizing Multidisciplinarity – The Experiment Marathons

The *Art & Brain* conference shows Obrist's emphasis on multidisciplinary work, of being prepared to think out of the box. This focus can also be seen in the following different marathon-projects. *The Serpentine Gallery Experiment Marathon* in London was an event conceived by Obrist and Olafur Eliasson in which 50 leading artists, writers, architects, and scientists, performed a series of experiments for a public audience on October 13th and 14th, 2007. The event took place in the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion. Obrist and Eliasson also invited the performance artist Marina Abramović, whose contribution was the work *Cleaning the House*. With full audience participation, she demonstrated methods to clean oneself by using active movement, sounds, and focused thoughts. The contribution was designed to illustrate the idea that one regularly cleans one's home but rarely thinks of a far more important area to clean, another home: one's own body (Obrist & Eliasson, 2008). The original version of the performance was in 1996; Abramović refers to it in an interview with Obrist in December 2007:

The only house we have to clean is our own body. We always clean something outside, but what about us? To clean the body-house means you go into nature, you don't eat for five days, you don't talk for five days, you do very intense physical and mental action. It sharpens your perception, you experiment with willpower, you prepare your body and mind to be able to do this kind of performance. But it is not only about the artist. I want to address the public (Abramović & Obrist, 2010, p. 23).

One year later, in 2008, Obrist and Eliasson curated another *Experiment Marathon*, this time at the Reykjavik Art Museum.

In both versions Obrist and Eliasson emphasize the value of working across disciplines. The idea behind the *Experiment Marathon* was not to talk about the connections between different disciplines but to allow audiences to witness and engage these connections directly. Both marathons included a corresponding exhibition (Obrist & Eliasson, 2008).

In Reykjavik Marina Abramović presented a work together with Jonas Mekas: *Soul Operation Table*. Abramović appeared on a video as a prelude, explaining the unrealized collaboration between herself and Dr Ruth, whom she originally intended to appear with in this event. Because this cooperation could not be realized as planned, Abramović interacted in an experiment with Jonas Mekas, one of the leading figures of American avant-garde filmmaking. Mekas took position on Abramović installation *Soul Operation Table*. He watched as Abramović isolated volunteers from the audience with blindfolds and earmuffs. During the playing of a joyous old Icelandic tune the whole crowd participated in a series of exercises (Obrist & Eliasson, 2008). Obrist summarizes his passion for the bridges across disciplines in an interview with Ingo Niermann and in the conversation with Tom MacCarthy:

I curate art; I curate science, architecture, urbanism (Obrist, 2011b, p. 35).

My home base is the contemporary art world but if I want to understand the forces which define contemporary art, (...) I think it's important to understand (...) what's happening in literature, what's happening in science, what's happening in all these other fields (CSM, 2009, 05:25ff.).

3.3 Inventing new Formats – Interview Project and Formula

Obrist himself describes his interview project as “a sort of parallel activity” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 70) that he sees as his “research and knowledge production” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 70).

The interviews are sustained conversations, not set up to be formal. During the conversation with Tom McCarthy (CSM, 2009), Obrist casually mentions that the overall idea is an infinite conversation, which at that stage already contained fifteen hundred hours of video material. The variety of different venues in which the interviews take place document Obrist’s permanent travels and his constantly being on the go. Obrist sees the interviews as an opportunity to immerse himself in a variety of different disciplines, as a way of permanent education, and emphasizes his fondness for informal settings “like over coffee or in a taxi” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 109). Apart from the diversity of locations in which the interview project takes place, it also includes a number of different languages, as Obrist conducts the conversations in Spanish, Italian, English, French, Chinese and sometimes even Russian (Obrist, 2011b).

Even if most of his interviews were never published, those that were form a great part of Obrist’s publications. There are collections of interviews on a particular topic. Obrist’s *A Brief History of Curating* (2011) is an assemblage of interviews he conducted with well-known curators such as Walter Hopps, Pontus Hultén, Anne d’Harnoncourt, and Harald Szeemann. Obrist himself describes this project in an interview with Gavin Wade at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2006:

There is this whole literature that is missing on the grandfather or grandmother figures within my own field—which is curating. (...) I thought it could be an interesting subject to go and see all these pioneering figures (...) and that if they

*tell me their story, one could have the whole history of twentieth-century curating as told by... (Obrist, 2011b, p. 133)*¹

In *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating* *But Were Afraid to Ask* the tables were turned and the interviewer became the interviewee: artists, architects and scientists such as Markus Miessen or Sophia Krzys Acord interviewed Obrist about art and curating. There are also almost 30 publications of interviews that Obrist did with individuals. These include the architect Zaha Hadid, the artists Jeff Koons, Yoko Ono, Christian Boltanski and Gilbert & George, and last but not least, an interview series with Marina Abramović. In the numbers of interviews with Abramović, their main topics were performance, durational works, art, curating, spirituality, and different projects which they both did individually and together.

Obrist himself sees a great historical value in his project: “Through my interview project the whole twentieth century has been told to me, but instead of through books, it’s been through people who knew those people” (Obrist, 2011b, p. 133).

In addition to the interview project, another one of Obrist’s ongoing projects is the collection of formulae. The formula project is an idea based on a more or less immaterial exhibition string that started with an exhibition that consisted of recipes, titled *do it*. One fundamental question of this project is how art can travel around the world without having to send objects around the globe. The idea of collecting formulae about art from different artists arose out of a conversation Obrist had with Albert Hofmann, the pioneering chemical inventor of LSD. During the conversation between him and Obrist in Basel, Hofmann suddenly started to draw the chemical formula of LSD onto a piece of paper that for Obrist appeared to be a very important document (CSM, 2009; Obrist, 2011b).

¹ Author’s note: in the original text the part “whole literature that is missing” is crossed out. In her foreword Interviewer into an Interviewee April Lamm describes this procedure throughout the whole book: “‘Boltanski pointed out to me that the danger of interviews is that we always say the same thing.’ We marked these spots accordingly, with (...) strikeouts.” (p. 7) For better legibility the strikeouts were removed in this text.

I was compelled by the simplicity of the drawing. His biggest invention, his whole life's work, had just been condensed to fit onto an A4 sheet of paper (Obrist, 2011b, p. 26).

So Obrist decided to scan it and send it to different artists with whom he had talked about formulae already. He went out and asked artists and architects for their equation of the twenty-first century. This was the encounter that got the ball rolling and many artists answered with all kinds of different formulae (CSM, 2009; Obrist, 2011b). One was Louise Bourgeois, who submitted the following list:

*A loves B and B loves C.
This is a strange state of being.
Nothing can be done.
There is no logic.
It is an unresolved mystery.*

- Louise Bourgeois

Hans Ulrich Obrist analyzed the formula project with the following words:

The instruction, not the object is the work. The instructions can be interpreted in different ways, like a recipe – which takes us back to Surrealism, Constructivism, and Dadaism. All the activities of these movements included much that did not exclusively have to do with the plastic arts (Obrist, 2011b, p. 49).

Furthermore he says, 'It's a conversation piece; my projects often have something to do with conversation' (Obrist, 2011b, p. 26).

4. MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ – SLOWING DOWN THE WORLD

4.1 Retrospective at MoMA 2010–The Artist Is Present

In the documentation about her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA)

in 2010 directed by Matthew Akers, Marina Abramović uttered a sentence which was also to become part of the title of the documentation: "The hardest thing is to do something close to nothing" (Akers, 2012, 19:24ff.). An important part of the exhibition was the fact that Abramović chose 30 young artists to re-perform five of her historical pieces. All five historical pieces were re-performed continuously throughout the retrospective at the MoMA, for a total of 600 hours (Akers, 2012; Biesenbach, 2010).

Apart from these re-performances, Abramović included a new performance, *The Artist Is Present*, the title being both that of the performance itself and of the retrospective. During the entire exhibition opening hours from March 9th to May 31st she sits on a chair, looking into the eyes of anybody who takes a seat on a second chair facing the artist, being only separated by a plain wooden table (which the artist later abandoned, leaving only the two chairs). During the time needed for her counterpart to leave and the next one to sit down, Abramović closes her eyes and only opens them when she senses that the next person is sitting calmly opposite her. Probably one of the most touching moments throughout this intensive performance was the moment when Ulay took the place on the vacant seat opposite. Whereas Abramović sits concentrated and more or less motionless during the whole performance, she cannot avoid a smile when she lifts up her head and looks into the eyes of her former partner and lover. Tears fill their eyes and after a couple of seconds Abramović reaches out over the table and Ulay, following her invitation, meets her hands with his. The audience reacts with thunderous applause (Akers, 2012).

In their conversations, Obrist and Abramović often talk about the importance and difficulties of long-durational pieces. In this context Abramović states: "Long durational work is the only time you can actually live in the present" (Abramović &

Obrist, 2010, p. 59). With her three-month performance *The Artist Is Present*, Abramović manages to add the *pièce de résistance* to her incredible career as a performance artist.

4.2 Video Portrait – The Curator Is Present

About three months after her exhibition at the MoMA, Marina Abramović's video portrait of Hans Ulrich Obrist² was first shown at the launching of Obrist's publication *Interviews, Volume 2* at the *MoMA PS1* in New York on the 23rd of October 2010. The original plan was that Abramović would perform at this event. However, she was kept away by unexpected circumstances. Instead Abramović and Klaus Biesenbach met at her studio to record a six-minute video portrait (West, 2010; MoMA PS1, 2010).

At the very beginning of the video Abramović holds a white sheet of paper, which covers her face, before the camera (Figure 1). The audience can only see her two hands, thumbs and forefingers holding the sheet of paper, part of her neck and shoulders covered in a black blazer, the top part of her head and in the background a very neutral white brick wall. Positioned in the middle of the piece of paper and written in simple block capital letters, two lines form with the words 'THE CURATOR IS PRESENT THE ARTIST IS ABSENT'. During the first eight seconds Abramović slowly lowers the sign and her face appears

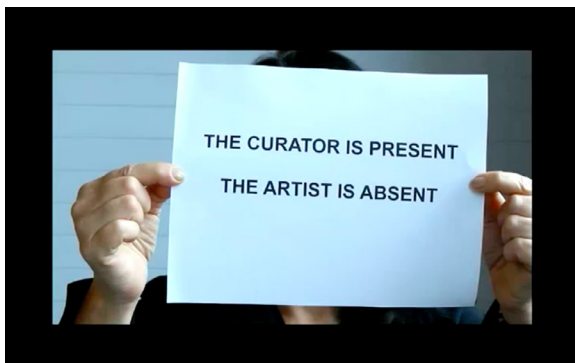


Figure 1. Video still *The Curator Is Present*
The beginning of the performance

(Figure 2). She is wearing a pair of glasses, her hair down and draping over her left shoulder, her face makeup-free, eyes focused on the camera's lens. After fourteen seconds she very calmly begins her speech with the words "Hans Ulrich is", followed by twenty-four adjectives and nouns describing the curator: "fast, sleepless, restless, curious, encyclopedic, adventurous, obsessed, possessed, art-olympic-marathon-runner, volcanic, hurricanic, mind-blowing, surprising, limitless, art-loving, over-medicated, explorer, catalyst, endless-interviewer, book-obsessed, stimulator, provocateur, enthusiast, tolerant" (Abramović, 2010, 0:14-3:35). She then ends the enumeration with the words "Hans Ulrich is a human being. Hans Ulrich is human being" (Abramović, 2010, 3:40-4:08). This first part of describing Obrist takes about three quarters of the whole performance (just under four minutes). Abramović takes the time to say each and every word very slowly, consciously and articulately. Her head and upper body stay calm and her eyes are focused for most of the time. The overall atmosphere is dictated by the almost sacral presence of the artist, but at the same time it seems to be hanging right on the border between drowsiness and totally enraptured concentration.

After this first, very calm and sacral part, Abramović suddenly increases the tempo and starts the enumeration of the twenty-four words

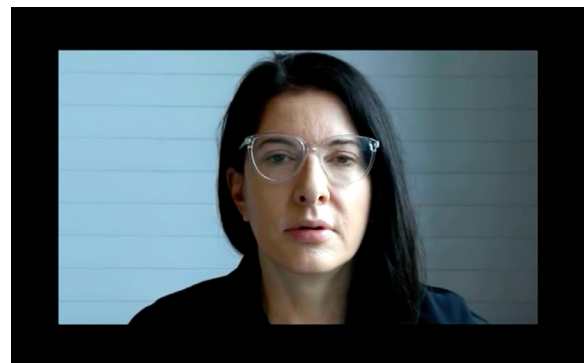


Figure 2. Video still *The Curator Is Present*
The concentrated presence of the performer

² The video of *The Curator Is Present* is available at <http://jameslaudicina.com/>

extremely quickly. This second enumeration still includes all twenty-four words. The only change in her words is that she says book-loving instead of book-obsessed, which she also continues to do in the following repetitions. However, after taking almost four minutes for the first round now Abramović repeats the words in less than fifteen seconds. In the following 1:20 min she races through the enumeration another seven times, always ending with the sentence “Hans Ulrich is human being” which can also be seen as a connection between the listings, if a comma is added: “Hans Ulrich is human, being fast, sleepless, restless” (Abramović, 2010, 3:40-4:08). Through the much higher speed in speech the words partly blur into each other and the order of words changes throughout the repetitions. Abramović’s upper body rocks forwards and backwards, the row of words gets interrupted by a quick gasp for breath every now and again; her face is stressed (Figure 3). After the ninth cycle the ecstatic flow of words ends abruptly. The artist’s eyes focus again, her body eases and her hands slowly lift up the sheet of paper: ‘THE CURATOR IS PRESENT THE ARTIST IS ABSENT’.

Abramović manages to illustrate her relationship to Obrist in a very simple but still highly intensive way. Though this six-minute work should not be seen as one of her long durational works, it does not at all lack concentration. As Glenn Lowry says

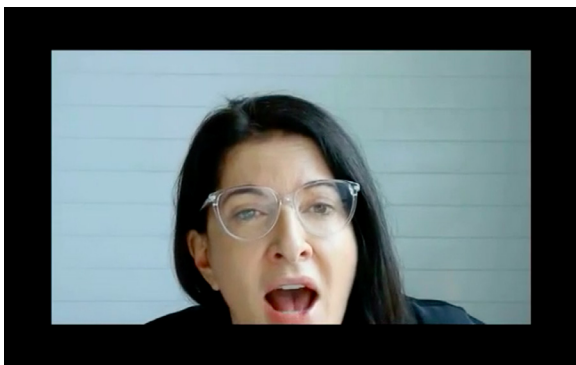


Figure 3. Video still *The Curator Is Present*
Estatic buildup toward the end of the performance

in his foreword of the catalogue of Abramović’s retrospective: “In every instance, no matter how simple the act, it is the intensity of her concentration and focus that holds us transfixed” (Lowry, 2010, p. 8).

5. [EX]CHANGING ROLES?

The first of the two initial questions presented by this essay was to what extent the lives and works of Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramović reveal the changing roles of curator and artist since the 1960s.

Both Abramović and Obrist seem to be the perfect examples for this change of roles. Abramović’s pieces of art are almost invariably performances and thus not object-focused. In this case the only objects the curator can take care of are either the performance itself, which is limited in time, or, in the case of a video or DVD of the performance, only a documentation of the performance, not the piece of art itself. However, at the same time, by enabling young artists to re-perform her works, Abramović ensures that her pieces will outlive their author and be passed on to the next generation of artists.

Similarly, Obrist enables not only performance artists but a whole variety of scientists, architects, poets and artists to have a platform for their works. This he does by inventing new formats such as the *Marathons* and the *Brutally Early Club* and the *Hyper Early Club*, by bringing people together and by exhibiting formulae instead of objects. He manages to take curating to a fresh, modern, 21st-century-level. He aspires to much more than the “taking care” aspect of curating and even moves far beyond Szeemann’s idea of an *Ausstellungsmacher* or a maker of exhibitions. Through his courage to realize ideas that overstep traditional bounds, Obrist not only follows art but profoundly shapes today’s art world. It is not surprising that throughout the last four years

he has been in the top ten of the *Art Review's* top 100 of the most powerful figures in the art world.

The second question, whether the performance *The Curator Is Present* can be seen as an example of an exchange of these roles became more or less redundant after reading about Abramović's curatorial projects, starting with her exhibition at the *Kunstverein Hannover* in 1991. This and other curatorial projects are much clearer examples of her change of role from artist to curator than her video-portrait. It cannot be denied that Abramović in particular and artists in general work in the fields of curating, as Obrist summarizes in an interview with Abramović: "artists have founded their own institutions, artists have founded spaces and artists have even founded museums" (Abramović & Obrist, 2010, p. 21).

What is somewhat more difficult to answer is the question whether or not, in the case of Abramović and Obrist, a full exchange of both sides exists. The crucial aspect of answering this question is determining whether Obrist's work is the work of an artist and/or to decide if parts of his work can be seen as pieces of art.

Tino Sehgal states: 'Obrist is first and foremost an initiator, somebody who starts things in varying fields (mainly art and architecture) and domains (mainly exhibitions and interviews)' (Obrist, 2011b, p. 10).

This distinctly emphasizes Obrist's work as a curator. Then again in the introductory lines to an interview with Jefferson Hack in 2007, Obrist is described as "a man who has made conversation itself into an art form" (Obrist, 2011b, p. 86), which would imply, if one sees the interviews and conversations as pieces of art, that Obrist does work as an artist. Still, building up a social network, bringing people together, talking to them and collecting and publishing the transcriptions of these conversations tend to be seen as work be-

longing in the area of a curator. Furthermore, his interviews are not parts of exhibitions but when published appear as ordinary books anybody can buy. In one of their interviews Abramović and Obrist discuss the importance of the context of doing things, and Abramović states:

It's very important in which context you are doing things. If somebody makes bread in a bakery it's a baker. But if somebody makes bread in the gallery, it's an artist (Abramović & Obrist, 2010, p. 166).

Thus, even if Obrist works in the context of art, he himself and his works stay in the background, they are not exhibited as pieces of art. However, even if he is pulling the strings in the background, he is not invisible, as Gavin Wade concludes in an interview with Obrist:

The interviewer cannot be invisible, which is a parallel to the notion of the curator: to believe that the curator is invisible or the interviewer is invisible is about denial or producing an artificiality (Obrist, 2011b, p. 135).

These few examples show that it is easily possible to argue in both directions. Obrist's focus clearly lies on curating. However, some of his works can be seen as artistic, possibly even as new forms of art. Perhaps his entire work can be seen as a gigantic piece of Conceptual Art.

The question of whether Obrist is an artist and whether his work is art could be answered more clearly if somebody would organize an appropriate retrospective of Obrist's work. An exhibition placed at different places all over the world: at a Starbucks in Berlin, where artists, scientists and architects meet at 3 or 6 a.m., a virtual collection of interviews located on the internet in Second Life ("Cao Fei has developed an amazing work called RMB City – a virtual reality city located in Second Life, a city that

produces an online art community and platform for production of reality" (Obrist, 2011b, p. 82)), a library and archive with all his published and unpublished works in the Alps, an exhibition of formulae on the airplane flying from one venue to the other, a huge list of unrealized projects at the MoMA in New York, words and statements describing Obrist, including Marina Abramović's video portrait and Louise Bourgeois' description ("Obrist is an art world nomad. His mind is like an immense computer cross-referencing art, film, architecture and social matters at a global scale. His synthesis is quite remarkable" (Obrist, 2006, quote on book-mark enclosed to book)) at a hotel bar in Dubai, and last but not least a long duration performance at the Serpentine Gallery in London by Obrist himself where he just sits to talk to everyone who comes to sit on the chair next to him: a worldwide retrospective entitled *The Curator Is Present*.

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just before starting this essay, seems to somehow close the circle, as I got the idea for this essay during my time in Hanover.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figures 1, 2 and 3: Video Stills Abramović, M. (2010). *The Curator Is Present. A video portrait of Hans Ulrich Obrist on the occasion of his book launch at MoMA PS1* [Motion Picture]. Courtesy the artist and James Laudicina Jr.