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# CURATIONISM

HOW CURATING TOOK OVER  
THE ART WORLD  
AND EVERYTHING ELSE

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# About This Book

**Now that we ‘curate’ even lunch, what happens to the role of the connoisseur in contemporary culture?**

‘Curate’ is now a buzzword, applied to everything from music festivals to artisanal cheese. Inside the art world, the curator reigns supreme, acting as the face of high-profile group shows and biennials in a way that can eclipse and assimilate the contributions of individual artists. Curatorial-studies programs continue to grow, and the business world is adopting curation as a means of adding value to content. Everyone, it seems, is a curator.

But what is a curator, exactly? And what does the explosive popularity of curating say about our culture’s relationship with taste, labour and the avant-garde? In this vibrant, revelatory and original study, David Balzer travels through art history and around the globe to explore the cult of curation, from superstar curator Hans Ulrich Obrist’s war with sleep to Subway’s ‘sandwich artists.’ Recalling such landmark works of cultural criticism as Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word* and John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, *Curationism* will change the way you look at art – and maybe even the way you see yourself.

‘This is an unusual art book. It is a book you should read and one that you can. Balzer traces the history and current hegemony of curationism, a practice of jumped-up interior decorators who double as priests explaining the gospel to the unlettered masses. A good read, if you don’t mind reading things that you don’t want to know.’ – Dave Hickey



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My research for this book began quickly and fortuitously. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was in town; I snagged an interview. Christov-Bakargiev was the artistic director of Documenta 13, the 2012 version of the contemporary-art event that takes place in the small town of Kassel, Germany, every five years. For decades, Documenta has set the pace for what is current in contemporary art. Christov-Bakargiev was of particular interest, for Documenta 13 was free-floating and amorphous, and she had refused to call her team of curators *curators*, instead using the term *agents*. Surely she would have something to say about the increasing use of the noun *curator* and the verb *to curate* outside the art world, where playlists, outfits, even hors d'oeuvres are now curated.

‘That is a sociological question, not an art question,’ she told me, irritated. The generalizations we were making were obvious, verging on meaningless. She pointed to Italian philosopher Paolo Virno’s 2004 essay *A Grammar of the Multitude*, which, she claimed, ‘says it all.’

Still, she furnished me with an exegesis. ‘We now live in a society where everyone [fears] they’re the same, so they want to specify and differentiate,’ she said. ‘My playlist is different from your playlist; my Facebook page is different from your Facebook page. It’s a sense of anxiety, where you think you don’t exist if you’re not different from everybody else. You can’t be part of the multitude. Whereas at the time of [Thomas] Hobbes, it was the opposite. You can’t be part of the country, the community, the society, unless you become the same, because you are born different, specific, unique.’

‘Now we’re all fucking the same. We have the same iPods, the same airports. And in order for the political system to work, everybody has to be driven by that drive [to be different]. If they don’t do that, their energy will explode into a Third World War.’

‘I’m being polemic,’ Christov-Bakargiev joked, finally. And she was, but she had lit a fire. I determined I did not want this book to focus on the popular understanding of curating as an expression of taste, sensibility and connoisseurship. This is not to say that I don’t deal with these things, but rather that this book takes for granted a reader’s understanding of the current *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *to curate*, as an extension of museum and gallery practice, an act of selecting, organizing and presenting items in the vein of an arbiter-editor. (It should be noted that genetic labs also employ curators, who essentially do the same thing, with scientific data.) Instead of writing about taste, then, which would risk fetishizing the curator, I wanted to write clearly about



how we got to this point. How did the curator ascend? How did the curator's practice bleed into popular – especially popular-consumerist – culture? The connection was, in my view, intimate and essential.

Hence *curationism* – a play on *creationism*, with its cultish fervour and its adherence to divine authorship and grand narratives. Curationism is also, of course, a poke at the contemporary art world and its pretentious, strained relationship with language (which Alix Rule and David Levine of the magazine *Triple Canopy* recently dubbed 'International Art English'). We now not only use *curate* as a verb, but also the adjective *curatorial* and the noun *curation*. Curationism also speaks to our general fixation, since the early-twentieth century, with isms, with camps and paradigms – our internet-age affiliations with them an extension of personal branding. (One of my heroes, Erykah Badu, called her first album *Baduizm*, suggesting the only ism to which she subscribes is her own complex, constantly evolving one.)

Curationism is, then, the acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being. I contend that, since about the mid-1990s, we have been living in the curationist moment, in which institutions and businesses rely on others, often variously credentialed experts, to cultivate and organize things in an expression-cum-assurance of value and an attempt to make affiliations with, and to court, various audiences and consumers. As these audiences and consumers, we are engaged as well, cultivating and organizing our identities duly, as we are prompted.

Hence the two sections of this book, 'Value,' in which a chronology of the curator is the primary focus, and 'Work,' in which the hyper-professionalization of the art world as well as our own shifting definitions of labour are addressed. Our obsession with the curator as an 'impartor of value' (a phrase I reiterate in the coming pages) has implications for everyone, inside the art world and out. Complicated in this matrix of value-making, we (often unwittingly) take on new personal and professional responsibilities. As Christov-Bakargiev said to me, in a comment clearly inspired by Virno, 'The curator is the most emblematic worker of the cognitive age.' This book is not anti-art world or anti-curator. It is strongly critical, but also merely an account, an acknowledgement, of curation's close alliance with capitalism and its cultures. As Tom Wolfe points out in *The Painted Word*, an admitted lodestar for *Curationism*, the art world has long been loath to admit its fundamental affiliations with and origins within, the bourgeoisie, engendering, in Wolfe's view, a paranoid turn away from the object, which nonetheless (or, rather, inevitably) engenders various cults of objectification.

Like *The Painted Word*, this book is for a general, non-art world and non-academic audience. Despite the influence of Virno and others, it does not employ what has become known as critical theory. Academics will no doubt recognize affiliations with this or that theorist, with whom I may or may not be familiar. Critical theorists, who were and are essentially philosophers, are now often miscast as discrete thinkers, when in fact many are expressionist ponderers, explicitly repudiating and

authorial, proprietary view of ideas and their histories. Indeed, without their diction and personae, many critical theorists would seem to hold self-evident, even plainly unoriginal, thoughts. Lacan did not invent the use of the mirror as metaphor for formative semiotic development; neither did Freud, from whom Lacan borrowed the idea. Foucault was not the first to speak of punishment, madness, order and sexuality. Barthes espouses any number of obvious thoughts; it is the genius of his articulation that sets them apart. (Most students read these French writers in translation, confusing things further; it's akin to listening to Serge Gainsbourg in translation.)

This mismanagement of theory represents several problems that typify the curationist moment. Firstly, it subscribes to an avant-garde understanding of the generation of ideas – in which ‘new’ and ‘original’ are paramount and successive, like a string of dictators, each making their elders obsolete and rearranging their country. As I argue in this book, the value-imparting system of the avant-garde has reached its inevitable (and glorious!) terminus in the early twenty-first century, where an idea no longer has to be ‘brand-new’ or ‘never-been-done-before’ in order to be valid. On that note, I believe in deep learning and context, certainly, but excessive fretting over attribution and precedent is paralyzing to dynamic intellectual thought. Any idea can be original if the mind that expresses it is confident and cultivated enough. This is what I strive for. It need hardly be said that this book contains no footnotes.

A myopic devotion to critical theory secondly engages in a pattern of demystification and remystification that is a key, obfuscating modus of the curationist moment – a not-so-covert method to instate, canonize and brand. Curators have become expert at presenting exhibitions and biennials that appear radical and oppositional, whether to museum orthodoxy or to regimes, common behaviours and codes, when curators in fact employ such radicalism and opposition precisely to attract audiences and to increase their events’ cultural capital. In the 1990s, underfunded museums recruited curators who in turn recruited artists devoted to audience engagement and seemingly unusual, participatory actions as a means of making the institution appear more enlightened and be more popular. These artists and curators are not outsiders; they have become some of the most successful, established cultural figures of our time. Similarly, the academy has used critical theory, in particular French poststructuralism, gender theory and queer theory, as a way of welcoming new students and diversifying (indeed revivifying) humanities departments. While an important political advance, such theory has become its own industry, merely trading an old canon for a new one, and retaining the same hierarchies and worshipful groupthink. There is little subversion to putting Judith Butler or Slavoj Žižek on a T-shirt, or to liking them on Facebook.

Is the curationist moment over? Not quite, nor, in many respects, will it ever be, as long as we continue to consume things, be particular and create culture – that is, be human. I deal with the specifics of this in the last chapter of this book, contending that we are moving on to something else

or at least could be. Katherine Connor Martin, Head of U.S. Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, who generously walked me through the provenance of the verb *to curate* (which has its roots in the early-1980s performance-art scene), thinks the word is very important. ‘If you were going to choose your vocabulary developments in the aughts,’ she says, ‘this would be on my list of things that are really emblematic of what’s happening in the language.’

That said, Martin notes, ‘it’s entirely possible that in, say, 2018, someone will look at [the use of *curate* as a verb] and say, “Ugh, that’s so dated, nobody says that anymore.” But *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes lots of obsolete and dated terminology. It’s an inventory of the entire history of English. So when we add something like [*curate* as a verb], we’re saying, “Regardless of what happens in the future with this usage, it’s important enough and well-tested enough now to be recorded for posterity.” We generally like things to have history behind them, and when we saw this went back to 1982, [we deemed] three decades of usage good enough. We think of it as writing the biography of these words.’

Dear reader, the biography of the curator, the curated, the curatorial and curation – a story for our times.

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# Prologue

## Who Is HOU?

Miami's South Beach is nothing like a white cube. On its easternmost side, along Collins Avenue and Ocean Drive, lies an impressive fleet of art deco hotels and, among them, the mansions of the resort neighbourhood's current and erstwhile residents, from J. C. Penney to Gianni Versace, who was shot dead on his front steps in 1997. Everywhere is colour, traffic; life is instinctive, vulgar, dangerous, fun. The cacophony of capitalism defines the area, from these hotels, to the clustered, modest houses and apartment buildings lying slightly west of them (many, in their lingering decay, redolent of South Beach's 1970s and 1980s depression – a period, with its cocaine dealers and crime, depicted in Brian de Palma's 1983 film *Scarface*), to busy Lincoln Road, one of the U.S.'s first pedestrian malls, and its surrounding, riotously colourful surf stores.

December is tastefully warm in South Beach. The sun toasts rather than scorches. Historically, this has not been a big tourist time, but over the past decade or so that's changed. I arrive in 2013 as a journalist, part of the hordes of mostly Europeans and Americans who have come to see Art Basel Miami Beach.

Art Basel typifies the ever-growing popularity of the fair in contemporary art, in which international commercial dealers converge in large cities at convention centres, piers, custom-built tents and hotels, securing high-priced booths in which to display and sell work from their stables of artists. Founded in Basel, Switzerland, Art Basel chose Miami Beach as an outpost more than a decade ago because of the wealthy Miami collectors who frequented its flagship event. Since then, around two dozen fairs have cropped up alongside Art Basel Miami Beach, most within walking distance – to say nothing of the myriad of parties, pop-up shops and ribbon cuttings that have come to comprise what is now Miami Art Week. South Beach is not transformed so much as intensified: more preening, more plastic surgery, more partying, more celebrities. Contemporary art seems put there by a production designer. Depending on how you see it, it's either the best or worst kind of ambient noise.

Much has been written about Art-Basel-as-Wasteland. In a 2012 Slate piece entitled 'The Eight Worst Things About the Art World,' fashion writer and Barneys New York 'creative ambassador' Simon Doonan put Art Basel at the top of his list, snidely describing it as 'overblown. . .[with] all that craven socializing and trendy posing.' There is a lot of art at Art Basel, to be sure, but what,

implies Doonan, does it add up to? As if at a crowded, expensive party, works jockey noisily for attention, devoid of gravitas and thematic order. It is no museum or gallery, in other words. Curators, those trusted sybils of the contemporary art world, are conspicuously absent.

Or are they? Famously, advertisements for bars and events are towed by planes above South Beach's long, populous white-sand beach. I go swimming one day, looking up from the crashing waves to see a different banner: 'HANS ULRICH OBRIST HEAR US.' I laugh. It's such an obscure plea – a knowing combination of unctuousness and plaintiveness. Hans Ulrich Obrist is one of the world's top curators, and a few nights previous I had attended a panel discussion he had moderated between Kanye West and architect Jacques Herzog. (Obrist calls both, to varying degrees, friends.) Clearly, Obrist is here. But why?

The banner's culprit was Canadian artist Bill Burns. Over recent years, Burns has made drawings, postcards, sculptures, watercolours and digital mock-ups addressing a variety of art-world authorities. The works express (and parody) the desperation and vulnerability felt by contemporary artists when fathoming the internationally known directors, curators and collectors who could make or break them. One Burns work is a proposal to affix a large sign to the roof of London's Tate Modern reading 'Hans Ulrich Obrist Priez Pour Nous' (in English, 'Hans Ulrich Obrist Pray For Us'). In Miami, Burns hired airplane banners every day to make similar appeals, not just to Obrist, but to other power or star curators, like Hou Hanru and Beatrix Ruf.

It's likely the beach crowd stared up in indifference at Burns' banners. Outside of Obrist, is Burns certain anyone he had appealed to by name was actually present at Art Basel? 'I have no clue,' he tells me. 'The fairs are very big events, but they take a certain kind of personality to enjoy, like going shopping at Christmas.' What would a curator do at Art Basel Miami Beach? 'It's true that curators over the last two hundred years have been understood as taking on a kind of public-service role. But now there's a curious mixed economy in the art world. A curator's job is often, at a fair, to cajole a collector into buying something for a museum – which I'm sure, for many, is not very pleasant. Artists, curators, collectors: we're all part of a regime. I'm part of it as well. You are too.'

After seeing Burns' banner, it occurred to me I was in eyeshot of the fuchsia tent of Untitled, one of Miami Art Week's newest fairs, whose press materials emphasized its use of a curator, Brooklyn's Omar Lopez-Chahoud. Lopez-Chahoud selected the galleries for Untitled, in some cases overseeing the arrangement of the fair's booths and works. But Untitled's gambit is not, in fact, novel. There's Frieze London, and now Frieze New York, both of which rigorously jury their exhibitors, using curators to handle 'special projects' such as sculpture parks on their tent grounds. And Frieze's template is arguably Art Basel's, whose former director, Samuel Keller, pushed curation to the forefront of the fair's brand (in Switzerland and in Miami), collaborating with Obrist as early as 2000 to launch, at first, a series of talks at the Swiss fair.

Now, within the sterile, chaotic confines of the Miami Beach Convention Center, there are, for instance, curated sections for artist films and videos. Art Basel Miami Beach's Nova and Positions sectors, the former meant for gallerists to display new works and the latter for gallerists to showcase the work of a single artist, do not have apparent curators, but suggest a 'curatorial sensibility': things judiciously selected and sleekly arranged, granting the fairgoer an experience much closer to that of a gallery or museum. When one considers Burns' (correct) guess that curators also come to fairs to acquire art for their respective institutions (or, more frequently, to function as advisors for trustees and the like who hold those institutions' purse strings), the fair becomes not anathema to curators, but specifically tailored to them. They occupy – and when not occupying, compellingly inform – both of the fair's essential roles, those of buyer and arranger-facilitator.

If curation is everywhere, it is also both strangely embodied and disembodied. The curator is no longer just an art-world figure. Within the art world, a select number of curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist dominate their institutions but also transcend them, playing roles in media and culture. Outside the art world, curation is powerful but also diffuse. Celebrities act as curators not just for exhibitions, but for music festivals and boutiques. We 'curate' in relation to ourselves, using the term to refer to any number of things we do and consume on a daily basis. Curators are visible in so many likely and unlikely ways. Are we witnessing their ultimate triumph, or a troubling, fascinating moment of their undoing?

While it can be said of professionals from many fields, it is particularly true of curators that no two are exactly alike. There is certainly no one quite like Hans Ulrich Obrist, who is affectionately known in the art world by his monographic acronym, HUO. One could begin by citing his dependable inclusion in the art-world 'power lists' that have become so omnipresent over the past five years or so. In 2009 to 2013, Obrist – with, in some years, his co-director at London's Serpentine Galleries, Julia Peyton-Jones – made the prestigious Top 10 of *ArtReview*'s Power 100 list every year, taking first place in 2009 and second in 2010 and 2012. While *ArtReview*'s Top 10 is sometimes broken by curators – Christov-Bakargiev was No. 1 in 2012 due to Documenta – it is more typically occupied by dealers, collectors and directors. If *ArtReview* is to be believed, Obrist is nearly as powerful as Larry Gagosian, the billionaire 'superdealer' with galleries in New York, L.A., London, Rome, Paris, Geneva and Hong Kong.

And while Obrist is not as wealthy as Gagosian, his influence, despite or indeed because of his singularity, is as representative. The *New Yorker*'s Nick Paumgarten described Gagosian as occupying 'an ecosystem of his own' – so does Obrist. As the world's most famous contemporary-art curator, Obrist sets a remarkable precedent, acting as the archetype for the professionalization and domination of his field.

Ubiquity and its attendant commitment to industry are Obrist's hallmarks. In May 2013, New York-based collector-oriented website Artspace put Obrist first in its '8 Super-Curators You Need to Know' piece, claiming he is renowned for 'being everywhere at once.' This trait is cited repeatedly by Obrist's friends and admirers. A profile of Obrist on the *New York Observer's* Gallerist blog, also from May 2013, is titled 'Marathon Man,' with the kicker 'UBIQUITY.' Writer M. H. Miller makes the wild claim that, 'Over the course of a single cigarette, I once witnessed [Obrist] roll up to an art fair in a car, run inside, come back out murmuring to his companion about what impressed him, then get back in the car and head to the next event, like some kind of highbrow European Roadrunner.' Modernist café-society photographer Brassai timed his fly-on-the-wall exposures to the duration of a cigarette's burning; in the 2010s, the cigarette can be used to measure the frenetic pace of the internationally mobile curator.

Hans Ulrich Obrist was born in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1968 to non-art-world parents, yet his legend begins early. In an interview for the December 2013/January 2014 issue of *Surface*, of which he is the cover star, he speaks to Paul Holdengräber about formative experiences. Obrist, who has a celebrated memory, was struck by the vast Abbey library of Saint Gall at the ripe age of three. He came across a Giacometti sculpture at Zurich's Kunsthaus shortly thereafter, and vowed to 'go to museums every day.' By the early 1980s, the pioneering curator Harald Szeemann was at Kunsthaus Zurich, and Obrist, now a teenager, soaked up his influential programming, visiting his Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk group show forty-one times. (Obrist remembers this 'because [he] counted it.') By sixteen, Obrist claims to have visited all the museums in Switzerland. By seventeen, he had cold-called Swiss art duo Fischli/Weiss and asked to visit their studio. They got on, and this precipitated more artist visits: Christian Boltanski in Paris at age eighteen; Gilbert & George and Gerhard Richter in London soon after. This was the genesis of Obrist's reputation for hyper-travel, the youth-discounted InterRail Pass getting him across Europe. 'I was everywhere, all the time, but I had yet to produce anything,' he tells Ingo Niermann in his 2011 book, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask*. 'Those were apprenticeship and journeyman years, a European Grand Tour.' In 1991, at twenty-three, Obrist curated his first group show in his kitchen, featuring Fischli/Weiss, Boltanski and other names that were or were to become art-world royalty.

Having already formed important mentorship relationships with curators Kaspar König, currently director of Cologne's Museum Ludwig, and Suzanne Pagé, currently artistic director of the Louis Vuitton Foundation for Creation, Obrist began Migrateurs, a curatorial project for the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (MAMVP) under the supervision of Pagé, who was director at the time. In *Surface*, Samuel Keller recalls his first, mid-1990s meetings with Obrist: '[He was] a pale, young, tall man schlepping around a large bag, with lots of documents, usually catalogues, always running around at a very fast pace. . . Whenever I showed up somewhere, Hans Ulrich was often

already there – but only for 24 hours.’

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It was around this time, 1993, that Obrist began to identify officially as a curator, his CV subsequently becoming a litany of exhibitions, biennials, publications and sundry appearances and accomplishments. Obrist worked at the MAMVP as a salaried, capital-C curator from 2000 to 2006. He took his current position at London’s Serpentine Gallery, with the title Co-director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects, in 2006. This arguably marks the beginning of his bona fide international celebrity. A *Blouin ArtInfo* piece from 2008 calls him ‘as close to a rock star as a curator can be,’ attributing 150 international exhibitions to him since 1991.

Nineteen ninety-three was not only the year Obrist officially embraced *curator* but also when he officially began to record interviews, a medium in which he has become a sort of guru. At the time of the publication of his second volume of interviews in 2010, Obrist was purportedly in possession of two thousand hours of taped interviews with various artists, architects, filmmakers, scientists, historians, etc., all organized by the interviewee’s last name. In that book alone, Obrist interviewed subjects as diverse as Björk, Doris Lessing and Alejandro Jodorowsky. In *Surface*, editor Karen Marta calls his interviews his ‘divine passion’ and likens them to poems. Obrist describes them as his retreat, his ‘secret garden.’

Despite that avowal, Obrist’s interviewing constitutes a colossal, very public aspect of his work. His impressive bibliography is in large part made up of ongoing transcripts of these interviews: in addition to two collected volumes, there is a series of smaller monographic artist-interview books (an extension of his Art Basel Conversations series), of which there are, to date, more than twenty; *A Brief History of Curating* and *A Brief History of New Music*, compendiums of interviews with important curators and composers; *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask*, an interview-based advice manual and professional biography. To wit, all of Obrist’s published interviews could fill a sizable shelf.

In 2006, Obrist’s first year at the Serpentine Galleries, he began his Marathon series, the inaugural version taking place around a pavilion designed with Rem Koolhaas (every year, Obrist and Peyton-Jones commission a different artist-designed pavilion on the grounds of the gallery). This first version, twenty-four hours in length, consisted of non-stop interviews with dozens of cultural figures – David Bailey, Damien Hirst and Ken Loach among them. Obrist continues to host different sorts of Marathons on a yearly basis. In 2013, the topic was his 89plus project, co-conceived with curator Simon Castets, which highlights young artists born after 1989. Essentially, the Marathons are symposia or salons (a historical concept that greatly fascinates him) running without adjournment, the absurdity or effortfulness of this durational aspect making it performance art as well as a meeting of minds. True to Obrist’s obsessive-compulsive nature, all Marathons are recorded and transcribed.

Obrist’s commitment to the interview and to the general proliferation of work is reminiscent of



Andy Warhol. But Warhol, the Pittsburgh-raised child of working-class parents from Czechoslovakia, created his Factory in Manhattan as a paradoxical mirroring and parody of the American industrial system. At the cheekily named studio, Warhol instigated a number of different projects. His screen tests mimicked the assembly-line star-making process of major Hollywood studios; his early films, boring by design, extended the screen tests to depict extempore scenarios and, with his eight-hour film *Empire* (1964), a single slowed-down static shot of the Empire State Building, simultaneously celebrate the quotidian modern and deride the Hollywood epic. As Camille Paglia points out in her study *Glittering Images*, Warhol's famous silkscreens, which allowed him to turn out artworks at a breakneck pace, used 'a commercial process for fabric design. . . . Disdaining authorship, he often used a rubber stamp to sign his paintings, and he professed indifference to their fate; they were as disposable as any other product of American manufacturing, then geared to planned obsolescence.' Warhol was lucrative, but his professed attitude toward his work was a characteristic lassitude. He was both self-propagating and self-negating; poet and critic Tan Lin notes in the fall 2001 issue of *Cabinet*, 'Eye and mouth are both surrogate modes of "being oneself"' and 'Warhol's two favorite surrogates were his tape-recorder and his camera.' Warhol, the ultimate postmodernist, turned himself into a machine in a kind of nihilistic denial of authenticity and authorship. His artistry was the sellout, his success at the cost of the essential him, whatever that was.

Obrist does this as well, but oddly, as a successor of Warhol, he is much more ingenuous. On examination, he seems the anti- or bizarro Warhol. In 2012, *New York* magazine noted his complete lack of ennui: 'He's not over anything, even as he's always on to the next thing.' Like Warhol, Obrist privileges self-negation, but it is of a remarkably different sort. 'I learned everything from artists,' he says, and his interview subjects reliably testify to this self-effacing sensitivity and curiosity. ('Curating always follows art, not the other way around – that would be awful.') Samuel Keller calls him 'the artist's best friend'; Klaus Biesenbach, director of the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 and curator-at-large at MoMA, calls him an 'idea machine.' Like Warhol, Obrist has a fascination with memory, but not in the sense of letting it be absorbed or displaced by the mechanics and gadgetry around him. Obrist's commitment to memory is old-fashioned. To all his interviewees, to all the artists with whom he works, he offers, as the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 humbly yet lavishly offers his lover, 'The living record of your memory. / 'Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity.' Obrist calls his ongoing process of recording and preserving interviews 'a text-machine' ('PhD students transcribe them into various languages'), but the end goal, unlike that of Warhol, a ditzy hoarder obsessed with trash, is rigorous, possessive archivalism. Obrist's productivity sets the gears of Warhol's Factory in reverse. His aim is to preserve. And so rather than the post-war American industrialists, Obrist's implicit model, while related, is earlier: the American Puritans and their proverbial work ethic. The title of one of his books, *dontstopdontstopdontstopdontstop*, is like a Dadaist take on a Puritan homily (e.g., 'Idle hands are the devil's playthings'). The title of his

celebrated exhibition series, *Do It*, also recalls a homily. Ongoing since 1993 (that year, again), *Do It* is a series of instructions for exhibitions written by famous people Obrist has encountered. Its emphasis on didactic or pedagogical text as the basis for action, however whimsical, also suggests the Puritans, known for their devotion to scripture or ‘the Word.’

Obrist’s fraught relationship with sleep is also puritanical. Warhol’s 1963 film *Sleep* provides the ideal counterpoint; this five-hour-long work, a precursor to *Empire*, depicts poet John Giorno sleeping. That’s it. In this anti-film, sleep is the anti-subject: an oblivion suggesting death, a fixation of Warhol’s. His camera stare once more demonstrates his nihilism, his celebration of inactivity. Giorno is idle, and Warhol, though aspiring to a static take, was forced, due to technical limitations, to work with a wind-up camera and to employ a rather complex edit. In this way, both Warhol and his audience become captive witnesses to absence, with the film becoming a loving, accidentally busy paean to inactivity, thwarting traditional American values of industry. Incidentally, Giorno, according to legend, was the only one Warhol knew at the time who slept at length, given the prevalence of then-trendy ‘uppers’ among Warhol’s circle.

Obrist, while Swiss, is more American. Ironically for a Swiss, he has an antagonistic relationship with the clock, and time (because there is never enough of it) – and thus with sleep. ‘Sleep to me is like an accident,’ he says to Ingo Niermann in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Curating But Were Afraid to Ask*, ‘because I really don’t want to sleep, and yet sleep outwits me again and again.’ In several interviews, Obrist has reiterated his life’s struggle with the body’s need for rest. This again can be dated to the early 1990s, when his career takes off. An ongoing commitment to travel is one method Obrist uses to defeat the clock. As *W* editor-in-chief Stefano Tonchi notes, he is always in a different time zone, and so is ‘in his own time zone somehow. There is no way to say where he is, because he doesn’t have a time zone.’

In his war with sleep, Obrist looked at cultural precedent. French novelist Honoré de Balzac legendarily drank cup upon cup of coffee every day to sustain his productivity, and so the young Obrist tried to emulate him. ‘I was having fifty coffees a day,’ he tells Niermann. ‘[But] at some point it simply abated.’ (Niermann notes that Balzac may have died from his coffee addiction, and Obrist laments that the novelist was ‘[r]elatively young’ and it was a ‘sad way to go.’) After Balzac, Obrist adopted a variation of ‘the da Vinci rhythm,’ modelled after the Renaissance artist: he slept fifty minutes every three hours. This was successful (he claims his first books were written this way) but in 2006, after getting his job at the Serpentine, which requires regular office hours, he stopped it. Presently, as he relates in a video on the website *Nowness* in January 2014, he always gets up very early and never goes to bed after midnight. On starting his Serpentine position, Obrist co-founded the Brutally Early Club, a crack-of-dawn salon that counts as one of its members another art-world workaholic, performance artist Marina Abramović.

Like Abramović, Obrist's commitment to non-stop work and as little sleep as possible not only has its puritanical aspect but also an association with American celebrity. Obrist's Nowness video, *Morning Ritual*, shows the curator in a blue windbreaker taking his morning run through a sun-dappled, gauzily shot Hyde Park, where the Serpentine Galleries are located, while his voice-over relates the oft-told story of his lifelong attempt to conquer sleep. The accompanying blurb extols his industry, quoting him as saying the park is his 'extended office' and claiming he still finds time to read at least a book a day (in the video, he says, 'I cannot live without buying a book every day'). The video is unmistakable lifestyle porn: a stylized and sanitized fantasy version of what we could do or be, couched in consumerist compulsions and giving us pleasure precisely because we know such ideals are out of reach. Ex-model Martha Stewart is the reigning queen of lifestyle porn, but it has a rich tradition in American celebrity, from Old Hollywood how-to memoirs, such as Joan Crawford's *My Way of Life* (1971), full of sadomasochistic advice like 'Never let your husband see you exercise,' to blogs like Gwyneth Paltrow's GOOP, now frequently mocked for its ridiculous accounts of the star's virtuous domestic and professional lives. A typical goop sign-off: '11:29 pm now, exhausted and ready to do it all again tomorrow!'

In 2013, Obrist released a book entitled *Think Like Clouds*, a collection of his doodles that suggests that even when he's not consciously working, he's working. Designed by artist and publisher Paul Chan, the cover underlines Obrist's ubiquity, with digitized versions of the curator's head proliferated in a polka-dot pattern. Inside are more than two hundred pages of Obrist's scribbles, amassed from about fifteen years of activity. In his introduction, Chan notes that, as is typical of doodling, Obrist will scribble during his interviews, or before and during public speaking, which makes him nervous. (Chan calls this 'a form of public notation.') The paper Obrist uses is telling: printed-out e-mails, conference itineraries, hotel stationery – all testaments to a frenetic, incessant, global pace. In a postscript essay, Michael Diers writes that Obrist's 'scribbles are attractive, and as to be *looked* at as well as read,' positioning them as potential artworks. Yet he also rightly notes that more and more, doodling is 'a feature of creative training programs for managers.' The entire book is uncannily reminiscent of the output of corporate-friendly doodling authority Sunni Brown, who has written two books on the subject and has held many international seminars. On her website, she calls her followers 'Doodle Revolutionaries' who 'put the DO in Doodle.' Always professing to be an inspiration rather than an impervious paragon, Obrist has, like Brown, gotten other people to follow his example. His popular Instagram account consists of shots of Post-it notes and other scribbled scraps from various cultural figures.

In 2010, Abramović appeared in a video, produced and directed by Klaus Biesenbach, to mark the release of Obrist's second volume of interviews. In this video portrait of Obrist, she begins by holding up a sign reading,

She wears the clear-plastic-frame glasses that are Obrist's trademark, as if to suggest that, for the duration of this video, she is he, or he has somehow possessed her. She proceeds to tell us slowly that 'Hans Ulrich is. . .fast. . .sleepless. . .restless. . .curious. . .encyclopedic. . .adventurous. . .obsessed. . .possessed. . .art. . .Olympic. . .monotone. . .runner. . .volcanic. . .hurricane. . .mind-blowing. . .surprising. . .limitless. . .art-loving . . .overmedicated. . .[et cetera]' and then repeats the list faster and faster until it becomes gibberish. She may be teasing Obrist, who by all accounts is a friend, or giving direct voice to many artists' concerns about the phenomenon of star curators like Obrist. If the curator is present, is the artist necessarily absent, i.e., disempowered and negated?

More important, however, is the alliance. It's as if Obrist is the other half to Abramović's binary, a Dostoyevskian double. Much can be made of this. Both Abramović and Obrist come from marginalized yet relatively new fields (performance art and conceptual curating, respectively). Both seem to have turned themselves into caricatured art-world celebrities, whose defining feature is constant activity for the sake of legitimizing their respective fields. On her part, Abramović has in recent years been dedicating herself to her own 'Method' of performance art, to be taught through a bricks-and-mortar Institute in Hudson, New York, but also at various temporary satellite locations around the world. There is a paranoia of professionalism here: a hyper- or accelerated desire to make ephemeral creative practice into 'value' and 'work' in order to secure its status and canonization. For both Abramović and Obrist, this dedication to permanence has a mock-totalitarian/-dystopian cast. Abramović's Institute is clinical and bureaucratic, its employees outfitted in white lab coats; Obrist has co-founded the Agency of Unrealized Projects, an archive of unrealized ideas and arguably a play on the National Security Agency, whose aim is also data collection. (Obrist counts Julian Assange among his many interview subjects.) The danger, as writer Thomas Micchelli noted in a 2012 piece for the art blog HyperAllergic, is that impermanence, in being so aggressively combatted, may paradoxically be summoned. Either that, or a severe neutering takes place. '[Abramović] refuses to accept. . .finality,' writes Micchelli, 'and proposes to recycle a fleeting mode of experience, however ersatz, into infinity.'

As a curator, Obrist has seemed both a totalizing example of contemporary art and an anomaly, his ambition causing him always to have one foot out the door. 'I flirted with leaving the art world as early as the mid-1990s, perhaps for architecture,' he tells Niermann. 'It was all too constrictive; but as [artist] Carsten Höller once said to me: it is the least bad place. And that's how these bridges across disciplines came into being. I curate art; I curate science, architecture, urbanism.'

Obrist may be the most powerful curator in the world, but he could also represent the

discipline's end-game: *après lui, le déluge*. As with Abramović, his attempts at securing his own – as well as existing, complementary – legacies, what he calls 'the protest against forgetting,' could constitute an elaborate sarcophagus, of which only pale imitations can later exist. As the typification of the curationist moment, Obrist may be its natural harbinger. To quote artist Philippe Parreno, 'I think [Hans Ulrich Obrist]'s one of the only great curators today – or the last one.'



We can't know who organized the first art exhibition. It is even more difficult to propose a teleology of curating, as it has become popularly known: any arrangement or editing of things, usually cultural. Arranging and editing, like sex and appetite, are common yet variously expressed. They are part of who we are and always have been. Mid-twentieth-century generalists spoke of this frequently. The great British art writer Kenneth Clark called collecting 'a biological function, not unrelated to our physical appetites' (think *natural selection*).

Sociologists, anthropologists and ethnologists contemporaneous with Clark, who looked for structural patterns across cultures, argued something similar. In his 1962 study *La Pensée sauvage*, French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss advanced a complex view of culture creation stressing the fine-art term *bricolage*, a concept not unlike what we currently understand as curating. (A present-day florist in Austin, Texas, is named Bricolage Curated Florals.) Patrick Wilcken, in *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Poet in the Laboratory*, elucidates Lévi-Strauss's theory of bricolage: 'Rummaging around their environment, [pre-literate societies] observed, experimented, categorised and theorised, using a kind of free-form science. They combined and recombined natural materials into cultural artefacts – myths, rituals, social systems – like artists improvising with the odds and ends lying around their studio.' The Lévi-Straussian *bricoleur* is, in Wilcken's estimation, 'a tinkerer, an improviser working with what was to hand, cobbling together solutions to both practical and aesthetic problems. *La pensée sauvage* – free-flowing thought – was a kind of cognitive *bricolage* that strived for both intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction.' The *bricoleur* is anyone attempting to plan, solve or create.

In his essay 'The Bias of the World,' art writer David Levi Strauss (no relation to Claude), formerly professor at one of the world's pre-eminent curatorial-studies programs at Bard College in Hudson, New York, also acknowledges the curator as *bricoleur*. But he begins his examination of the curator by looking at the titular origin of the word, a revealing exercise illuminating the contemporary curator's conflicted, paradoxical role. The use of *curator* can be traced back to the Roman Empire, in which *curatores* were bureaucrats made responsible for various departments pertaining to public works. (*Curatores viarum*, for instance, were responsible for overseeing roads.) The root of the word is the Latin *cura*, meaning *care*; *curatore* means, essentially, caretaker. The titl

of curator was used not just for bureaucrats, but for types of guardians or tutors under Roman law, who were either appointed to minors or to those with whom they were entering into contracts, in order to secure both parties from subsequent litigation due to the minor's inexperience. Curators could also be named as caretakers-cum-advisors for those classified as *prodigus*, or prodigal (i.e., proven to be squandering their estate or inheritance), and as lunatics. One should also not neglect the Roman *procurator*, most often a member of the equestrian class, and appointed to supervise outlying provinces. Pontius Pilate, the man who sentenced Christ to die on the cross, is referred to in the Bible as a procurator, although in other literature he is given the title of prefect.

By the Middle Ages, the Christian Church had appropriated the term. Writer Erin Kissane notes that *The Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term via William Langland's fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*: 'curatoures' are parish priests, 'called to knowe [know] and to hele [heal]' their 'parisshiens [parishioners].' David Levi Strauss rightly deduces that the early roles of curators thus constitute this Roman-medieval double duty, a 'curious mixture of bureaucrat and priest,' a split between 'law' and 'faith' – not unlike the contemporary curator within major art institutions, who, we assume, wants to make the public believe in art and artists, and also to function successfully within the political machinery of the museum or gallery, liaising with directors, donors and trustees, and sometimes securing works for loan or purchase.

There are pejorative suggestions to add to Levi Strauss's interpretation. The Roman curator, and especially procurator, was an agent – some might argue a tool – of the state. A person of rank, the curator was nonetheless at the mercy of those above him. Pontius Pilate is the obvious example of the toadying Roman procurator, sent to a far-flung colony (in his case, Judea) to enforce the power of his superiors. In the Gospels, Pilate is reluctant to condemn Christ. Depending on which source you consult, Pilate's decision to crucify Christ was due either to pressure from the Jewish Sanhedrin, who claimed Christ was controverting Jewish law, or, as the Sanhedrin themselves argued to strengthen their case, to Christ's flouting of Roman tax laws. In this latter sense, the Roman procurator Pilate is little more than a glorified tax collector. One could gather that the procurator is superfluous, only a nominal 'caretaker.' In *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Roman historian Suetonius refers to procurators a few times, always with the implication that their titles are politic stepping stones. Of the Emperor Vespasian's greed, Suetonius writes, 'he advanced all the most rapacious amongst the procurators to higher offices, with the view of squeezing them after they had acquired great wealth. He was commonly said "to have used them as sponges," because it was his practice, as we may say, to wet them when dry, and squeeze them when wet.'

The medieval curate is a position that endures in the Church in varied form to this day. The curate's title is not as tokenist or honorific as the Roman curator's or procurator's could be; the curate has important duties within the hierarchy of the clergy – he is what we commonly know as the



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