

Archipelago

Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist
by Christian Ernten

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Museo Obrist or the library of the future

Hans Ulrich Obrist's knowledge project navigates between a wish to contain the intimacy of the medieval library and the drive to conceptualize a 21st-century institute. Through his art exhibitions, interview marathons and archive projects Obrist introduces a polyphony of knowledge guides. Volume interviews this conductor of different voices.

Christian Ernten: I attended your lecture on the Museo Obrist, the digital archive, at the Festarch event in Cagliari (Sardegna) last summer.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Ah, you attended that. It was slightly surreal.

CE: (laugh). I'm happy you say that! Nevertheless it made me curious about your interest in archives and libraries.

HUO: My interest in archives and libraries is longstanding. We held many discussions on archives in the 1990s. These things are biographic, just like most of my projects, for example my Kitchen show. It dealt with archives and sort of formed my curatorial beginnings. At the time I didn't have space for my books so my kitchen became a library. Fischli/Weiss and Boltanski were artists I knew who dealt with archives. I had many discussions with them. They suggested I put an exhibition on in my kitchen. So books moved out and art moved in. This led to my first show in 1991.

I had accumulated a great many catalogues in my apartment in Switzerland, eventually numbering into the thousands. You could hardly walk around because the books were piled up to the ceiling and only then along a small path between the stacks. When I moved to Paris for work just after the Kitchen show I wondered what should happen with them. I realized that from then on where I would live and work would be completely unpredictable. And indeed after Paris I went to Rome after which I moved to Berlin and then back to Paris. I lived in London in 1996-97 and then I went to Paris again only to move back to London in 2000 and again back to Paris later on. There was a lot of oscillation between Paris and London and then to Berlin and now again London. The question was: what to do with all these books?

In about 1992 I got in touch with the University of Lunenburg (in northern Germany) where a magic triangle of art historian Beatrice von Bismarck, historian of mathematics Diethelm Stoller (who ran the Lunenburg Kunst-raum) and sociologist of art Ulf Wuggenig worked. Together they produced portraits upon which students would work for two or three years. I did a project there in residence. Since I had this practical problem with my

books I decided to do something with what it means that these books, these archives constantly move around. The book *Interarchive* (Frankfurt, W. König, 2002) is the outcome of this project.

We brought my whole archive of books to Lunenburg. I invited artists such as Christian Boltanski and Hans-Peter Feldman to work with these books. Boltanski held a seminar on students' grandparent's photo albums. Feldman held a seminar on how to classify my books. He did so according to color, weight and smell.

In the early 1990s I worked with Kasper König – he always archives everything of one artist in the same box. So in Lunenburg I used the same principle. I had these archive boxes and everything on Alighiero e Boetti is in one box, etc. As part of the Lunenburg project the content of the box became a little bit like Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* of place, laid open on a table and photographed. That was Feldman's advice. A lot of these tableaux were then created and at the same time recorded: the impressions, the smells and the colors.

CE: Did the transformation of the institutional function of the library or the archive play a part in this project or later work?

HUO: This question of how to make things public became an issue in the early phase. When you put on an exhibition at the university and also publish a book on your archive to a certain extent you question how you can make such an archive public, how to make it accessible? Because of their temporary character, exhibitions are always a way for me to test different scenarios. A library is much more permanent. Yet I think a very interesting open model is presented by Rem Koolhaas with the Seattle library. It's really an agora, a forum, a place to meet. It's basically about how to make things public, how to reinsert public space in a context of an diminishing public space.

CE: How did you address the accessibility of the Lunenburg project?

HUO: We thought it interesting for visitors to be able to dive into it from different ways via these different artists. They can invent their own classification or follow ours. They experience these different boxes almost like a story. They can listen to the story of discovery and at the same time look at the actual objects, the actual books and consult them. Moreover, through Feldman's intervention visitors were stimulated to do something with their own archives. Everybody has an archive and, as Eric Hobsbawm has said, we're all asked to collectively protest against forgetting to some extent. This is what is interesting about Boltanski asking students to bring their grandparents' photo albums in. Everybody had this extraordinary family archive. The project thus also had a participatory dimension: the visitor was challenged to engage differently with the question of what an archive is or how one works with memory. As such, the *Interarchive* is about what is between your and my archive, and my archive and those of every visitor. A library is also a coming together of lots of people's archives.

Usually someone's archive becomes interesting only thirty or forty years after the fact. While these archives are produced nobody looks at them. In 1992-93 a lot of people also started working with the internet, the digital archive. So we thought it would be interesting to

bring together maybe fifty archives from all over the world and my project would actually not be my archive, but the intersection of these archives. The book thus presented a collection of different archives. You could imagine one day that this might be an institution of the future. One could imagine a very big institution; it would not be one Aby Warburg archive, but there would be many different types of archives.

CE: Is your Lunenburg project a way of deconstructing the library or library-making?

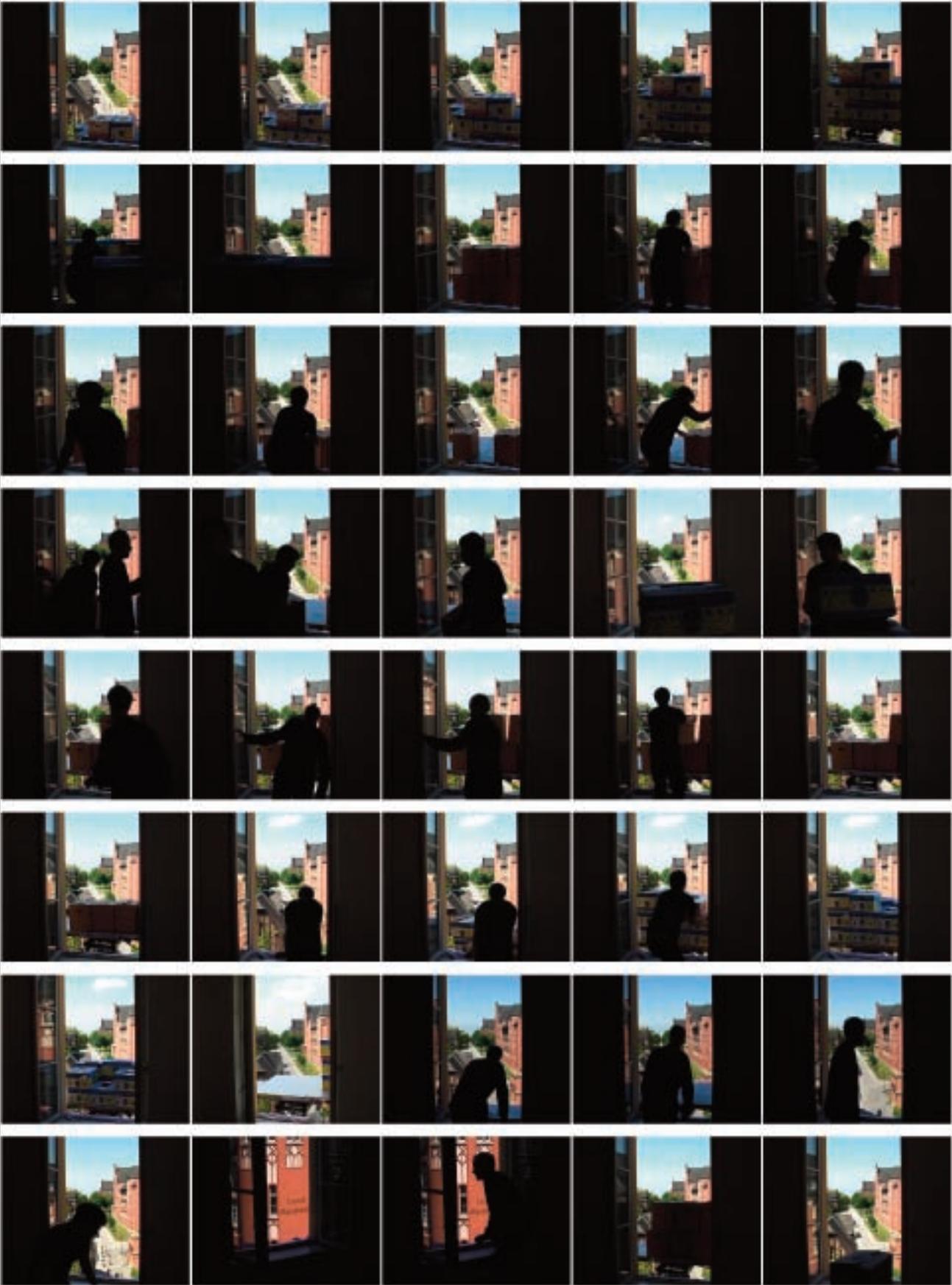
HUO: Yes, it's a form of atomization, but I'm not interested in just creating an atomized scattering. I want to think about how we can create tentacles. It's comparable to how I do my exhibitions. I create a lot of temporary autonomous zones and then connect them via tentacles in order to create a web. This was the idea with *Interarchive*. This book could be consulted and we continued to do seminars and get people, artist and lecturers to comment on the archive. Currently the books are in my apartment in Berlin, a sort of *zwischen Lagerung* [an interim warehouse]; we have to wait and see what the next step will be. The project is about in between; books always seem to be in between. They don't rest. And each team has an artist who sort of accompanies and follows it so the whole thing becomes a story.

CE: In which way is this 'in between-ness' important for your thinking about libraries?

HUO: Most of the libraries I have visited thus far are continental. They are very big chunks, very big, have big wings or towers. I would be interested to push Eduard Glissant's idea of the archipelago. There could be an archipelago library. This also has to do with a certain intimacy. The St. Gallen library is important in this respect. In St. Gallen, where I grew up, there is a famous monastery with a most famous library. My whole thinking about libraries has to do with the St. Gallen library which has a most extraordinary medieval codex. This library is very intimate space. I have spent days there looking at these medieval books. I have never had this kind of experience in any library since. Bigness often destroys intimacy like that at St. Gallen. We should consider an archipelago model for future libraries, a cluster of many smaller types of places which together would function as one very big library.

CE: How would you solidify knowledge in archipelago clusters? What is the new standardization of the future library?

HUO: My advice regarding the library of the future would be to have Eduard Glissant conceive it. He shouldn't be the architect, but he should definitely be an adviser. Glissant's whole idea of resisting homogenizing forces would be incredibly interesting and in some kind of way might create a multiplicity of voices. A library could also hide other libraries. There doesn't need to be one master narrative, but libraries within the library. There are lots of different ways to classify knowledge. Ordering systems always imply a system of disorder from the other angle. There is always one possibility surrounded by others. I'm interested in people's libraries. Whenever I meet a great artist I'm incredibly fascinated by their books. I like to imagine a library in which people are more than abstract. My view of things is very personal, but how can we make this public? We need a polyphony of guides.



Photos by Anri Sala

CE: What do you mean by 'guides'?

HUO: Individuals who help you navigate through knowledge. For example the protagonists of *Interarchive* could be our guides. This could be an idea for the library of the future. Nothing is more fascinating than looking at the OMA books, Rem Koolhaas' or other architects' or artists' offices. *Do it*, for example, is an ongoing expose about instructions.

The idea to ask many artists and scientists for their formula for the 21st century came from my conversation with Albert Hofmann about LSD. What kind of social or other implications can a formula have? 250 artists, architects and scientists have contributed their formula and we're now preparing a book. Again, this is about the idea that you have a prolificness of guides through knowledge. To have a guide, physically or digitally, is the future; it is an extraordinary way to be exposed to knowledge.

CE: This makes me think of the role of the master in a medieval context.

HUO: Its has more to do with a polyphony than with the master. It definitely relates to the medieval library, given my obsession with the St. Gallen library. I spent a great deal of my time there during my youth. It should be a prolificness of protagonists and there should be no one master narrative. You can imagine that for the library of the future one might start with fifty people but then very regularly one would attract new protagonists, new navigation rules, new suggestions. For example, while Feldman conducted his project students brought their own navigation rules into play. In some kind of way it's not so different from what's happening on Amazon where all these booklists are popping up. A system which does not work with a commercial aim, but with the aim of common knowledge production. Most websites like Amazon now are commercially driven, but it could be sort of accumulative production knowledge over time showing all these different routes and layers.

My model of the library doesn't have so much to do with masters, but with the Middle Ages in that it deals with migration and the idea of the migrating monk. At the end of the day the reason I move from city to city is that for me cities are archives and when I'm in a city I plug into the knowledge and libraries of the city. The most important library of the city is its people. When I'm in Paris or London I interview all these key protagonists in science, architecture, literature and arts. Very often these are old people, not only people of our generation. There are a lot of people 100 years old or 90 or 80 and I interview them with the idea of memory transfer in mind. When I lived in Paris for years I visited and interviewed people daily. After a while I didn't feel as if I had done it all, but to some extent it felt as if I had dug as deep as I could. Then I moved to London again. In that sense it's not so different from a monk who would learn everything he could read in a monastery and then move on to the next one. So cities in this sense are a kind of knowledge and in some kind of weird way that is the link to the Middle Ages.

CE: You spoke of a form knowledge production in opposition

to commercially driven forms.

This connects to a discussion of the role of ethics and library-building.

HUO: From the beginning of *Interarchive* I thought of ways to make it useful for other people. I believe in the idea of libraries as a place where one can freely examine all knowledge. What we realized is that we live in a context that fetishizes archives. You read in the newspaper how the Getty bought this or that archive for millions of dollars. The archive as such becomes a rarified object. That's why it's interesting to look at archives as they develop. What are our contemporaries doing with archives? This led to a new layer to the *Interarchive* project. Joseph Grigely decided to make an archive of all my curatorial work, which is basically the inversion of what normally happens. He's archiving every single thing I have published, written, every invitation card, every lecture, every email. That will lead to an exhibition and also to a bibliography.

CE: Both the dominant ways of knowledge production and its critiques have their basis in Western cultural tradition. How does your project offer real, new ways of going beyond the dominant discourse in visual and written language?

HUO: Artists are great facilitators of new ways of seeing. It's the same as Cocteau and Diaghilev who had a conversation at the heyday of the Ballet Russe in which one said to the other 'étonnez-moi' [surprise me]. Artists often produce something one would never expect. I have learned the most unexpected things about archives from artists. They definitely question given Western standards. Since we did *Interarchive* we first went with *Cities on the move* to Asia and now there's a big focus in my research on the Middle East and India. This also leads to a lot of new questions in relation to non-Western archives. I also spoke with Stuart Hall and he was a great influence. Since 1997, when I started my interview project, another dimension has been added. There are now about 1400 hours of conversation and this offers a way of opening up new questions.

CE: You spoke about all the work and the traveling you do. Does this leave you any time to read?

HUO: It's about freeing up time and traveling has always done that for me. The interviews have always been a thorough methodology. I never gave up the reading discipline one acquires as a student and I think the interview is the trick. In preparation for the interviews I would read everything the person has written.

CE: Doris Lessing spoke in your interview with her about the negative impact of the internet on young people's reading efforts. Do you agree with her discontent?

HUO: The Internet is both an extraordinary expansion of possibilities and an extraordinary parallel reality. I still have a very strong connection to books. I buy a book per day and I edit lots of others. So you could say I'm addicted to the object of the book. And yet as a parallel reality I have an addiction to digital archives. I would like to suggest that the increase of the digital has reinforced the addiction to the physical book. I'm interested in what it means for memory. Rem Koolhaas described it in the preface *Don't stop...*

CE: ...'a hedge against the systematic forgetting that hides at the core of the information age'.

HUO: Exactly! To some extent this obsession of people with art and architecture has led to a form of oblivion for former pioneers. My interviews have a lot do with revisiting forgotten pioneers. Now, luckily, Yona Friedman is a bit more remembered, but when I started interviewing him 10 years ago nobody went to see him. These people are not remembered enough. That's something I felt intuitively more and more strongly. To some extent the idea to counter this oblivion is absolutely the key moment in our work with archives, whether these are books or digital.

CE: In counteracting this forgetting you add to the overload of knowledge. How do you instruct your audience as to the canon they should know? Should they read your interview with Robert Crumb or Rem Koolhaas?

HUO: I do interviews which are the core of my exhibitions. There is always a very strong relation to the research I do for a specific project. It is obviously impossible to interview a thousand people. I read everything by one person as a way of slowing down. Preparing takes a long time; I try to see that person often. Sometimes it takes a long time to find a person. Very often the process takes 5 or 10 years before it comes to a conclusion. Paradoxically, the interview project introduces slowness into a very accelerated environment. To answer your question about what to read: it's possible to read the interview and one interview will lead to the other interview, but it's also possible to pick out an interview if someone has a specific focus. In every interview there are a number of recurrent questions in which I'm always interested. Two recurrent questions are: who have been the heroes, and, who have been the pioneers? If you ask a pioneer who his or her pioneers are you're offered a kind last chance to view the history of the last century first hand. Another key to my interviews is that art is my home base from which I venture into other fields. Artists speak about architects and scientists and little by little these fields acquire their own logic. I'm also very interested in making portraits. I wonder whether we can actually do a collective portrait. Can we do a portrait of a city? In response to this question I started to organize the marathons with Rem. Can we do a portrait of a movement? In response to this we developed the Metabolism project. We did a project on the on the Metabolist architecture movement in Japan, showing its contradictions.

CE: What do we learn about Hans Ulrich Obrist via your interviews?

HUO: The reader must answer that. There's certainly an obsession about unrealized projects. When I was 18 or 19 years old I met Alighiero Boetti who said that in more than three decades of making exhibitions he had always been asked to do the same thing: museum or gallery shows. He really wanted to exhibit on an airplane. To organize Boetti, Cieilli Ad alta quote became a project I realized with Museum in Progress and the idea to facilitate and make happen unrealized projects remained ever since. One also sees the conviction that we need to go beyond the fear of 'pooling knowledge'. This is something that pops up in every interview. This also relates to the library: how does someone who goes to read about architecture but actually needs to read about

literature get to read literature? Orhan Pamuk said that he really believes that novelists and writers shaped cities.

CE: Did you need to overcome this fear yourself as well? I'm asking these kind of personal questions since you're the linking factor in all your interviews. The reader needs to have an interest in you or trust you in a certain way.

HUO: Yes, in the beginning I felt this fear strongly. As a young curator I didn't dare speak with a scientist. I thought, 'what I'm I going to discuss with these people'. Since we were thrown in the same space, little by little I became friends with these neuro-scientists, physicists, all kinds of different people. As regards trust, I mentioned to Cagliari in relation to the Museo Obrist that I'm interested in looking at digital archives, but I was not the only one at the table. We always need trust, but it is equally important always to doubt.

CE: I guess central to the network is that you can doubt the material, but trust the person?

HUO: Yeah, yeah...

CE: If you're the central guide in our network, what would you define as the most urgent issues in our society today in terms of library-building?

HUO: The protest against forgetting and the importance of age should not to be discarded. Also key is the fear of pulling knowledge. In a more specialized context there is more and more knowledge. This should be used. Yet disciplines hardly mix. One sees this clearly in all big cities. When we sponsor a lecture by a famous architect, the architect world pops up. When we organize a lecture by a famous artist, the artist world pops up. Then we organize a lecture by a famous scientist and the science world pops up. Everybody is busy with his or her professional microcosms. Each of these fields has become an industry with a lot of formations, a lot of obligations. So the question is, how can we liberate time for sessions in which you actually open up? And that's what the marathons are trying to achieve. In this way the marathon is a slightly utopian endeavor. So someone who wants to listen to Doris Lessing also listens to Gilbert and George or Ryan Gander.

CE: Is one of the urgent issues also protesting against the homogenizing forces of globalization?

HUO: There are basically two different developments: the first rejects any global dialogue and that leads to totally local archives and endeavors. Then there is global homogenization. The challenge is how to use global dialogue to produce difference and that means avoiding libraries and archives that all look the same.

Rem Koolhaas developed a marvelous model in Seattle of how a city library can be a truly public space in the 21st century. I was part of many brainstorm sessions with Rem and he basically wanted the Interarchive project and the research and the connection with the artists to play a role in his project. The situation did not permit this on account of the bureaucracy. We were told that art is another department. So the question is how can we have a situation in which the different disciplines actually fuse? Integrated solutions are very important. So before a municipality gets a library or a museum, artists, the curator and architects should sit around the table and discuss how a more holistic version of a 21st-century institution could work.