SOFTWARE & TECH

Ways Of Curating Hans Ulrich Obrist

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Introduction

Hans Ulrich Obrist stands as one of the most influential curators of our time, a figure whose relentless energy and intellectual curiosity have reshaped how we think about exhibitions, art, and the very role of the curator. Known for his prolific output—curating hundreds of shows, publishing thousands of interviews, and transforming the Serpentine Galleries into a laboratory of the contemporary—Obrist's practice is anything but static. To understand the **ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist**is to explore a methodology that is simultaneously rigorous and poetic, structured and improvisational. His approach is not a single formula but a constellation of habits, philosophies, and actions that together define a distinctive curatorial ethos. This article unpacks the core strategies that characterise his work, offering insights for curators, artists, and anyone fascinated by the power of gathering, dialogue, and display.

1. The Marathon Interview: Dialogue as Curatorial Practice

Perhaps no single activity is more emblematic of Obrist's method than his legendary interview marathons. These extended, often all-day conversations involve dozens of artists, scientists, architects, and thinkers, blending disciplines in a seamless flow. For Obrist, **curating Hans Ulrich Obrist's way**means treating the interview not as a mere preparatory step but as a public, collaborative artwork in itself. The marathon format, initiated in 2006 with the "Interview Marathon" at the Serpentine, breaks down hierarchies between speakers and audience, encouraging spontaneous connections. Each session becomes a micro-exhibition of ideas, where themes emerge organically. This approach demonstrates that curating is not limited to object selection; it is also about orchestrating human encounters. Obrist's interviews—thousands of hours recorded and transcribed—serve as an archive of contemporary thought, a living museum of voices. By making dialogue central, he redefines the curator as an activator of conversations rather than a mere gatekeeper.

1.1 The "Do It" Project: Instructions as Exhibition

Another pillar of Obrist's practice is the **"do it"** project, which he initiated in 1993 with artists Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier. This ongoing series invites artists to create instructions for works that anyone can execute. The exhibition exists only as a set of scripts, realised each time in a different location. This radical departure from traditional object-based curation emphasises process, participation, and reproducibility. **Ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist**here involve relinquishing control: the curator provides the framework, but the content is generated anew by each presenter. The project has been hosted in over 40 countries, demonstrating that curating can be a distributed, democratic act. Obrist often describes the "do it" project as a "book of instructions," linking his curatorial work to the art of writing and the open score. It challenges the notion of the exhibition as a fixed entity, favouring change and adaptation.

2. The Notebook as Curatorial Tool

Obrist is rarely seen without a small notebook—the classic black Moleskine—into which he scribbles ideas, names, and sketches. This humble tool is at the heart of his curatorial method. He captures fleeting thoughts, connections between disparate fields, and the seeds of future collaborations. For Obrist, the notebook is a curatorial space: a portable exhibition of ideas awaiting activation. He often says that curating Hans Ulrich Obrist in the image of a conversation. This practice highlights that his work relies not on grand manifestos but on accumulation and association. The notebook also reflects his belief in the importance of memory and retrieval—many of his projects emerge years after a note was first jotted. It is a personal archive that fuels his astonishing output, reminding us that curating, at its core, is a practice of attention.

3. Collaboration and the “Laboratory” Model

Obrist’s curatorial work at the Serpentine Galleries, where he served as Artistic Director alongside Julia Peyton-Jones and later with other colleagues, is defined by a laboratory-like atmosphere. Rather than static exhibitions, he champions ongoing programmes, commissions, and residencies that blur the line between production and presentation. The Serpentine Pavilion, for instance, becomes a site for conversations, performances, and research, not just an architectural object. This **curatorial approach** involves intense collaboration with artists, architects, scientists, and the public. Obrist often describes himself as a “catalyst” or a “connector,” someone who facilitates interactions rather than imposing a thesis. His way of working is inherently interdisciplinary: he brings together a composer, a geneticist, and a poet for a public conversation, then uses that dialogue to inform future projects. The laboratory model demands flexibility and openness, qualities that Obrist embodies through his relentless travel, correspondence, and publishing.

3.1 The Role of the “Bridge” Between Art and Science

A defining feature of Obrist’s practice is his commitment to bridging art and science. He has curated numerous exhibitions and events that engage with biology, physics, and technology, such as “The Age of the Earth” or the “Marathon on the Future of Energy” with artists and scientists in dialogue. This cross-fertilisation is part of **ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist** that see knowledge as fluid. He believes that curators must step outside the art world to remain relevant. In his interview books—like “The Age of the World Picture” or “Ways of Curating” (a title that echoes his own practice)—he frequently addresses the need for curators to develop “sensitivity” across disciplines. His collaborations with scientists such as Stefano Boeri, or with theorists like Bruno Latour, show that curating can produce new knowledge beyond aesthetics. The bridge is not just metaphorical; Obrist physically arranges encounters, structuring time and space for unexpected synergies.

4. Archival Impulse: The Exhibition as Accumulation

Obrist’s exhibitions often resemble dense archives, overflowing with objects, notes, and ephemera. This is not clutter but a deliberate strategy to mirror the complexity of contemporary life. In shows like “The World Goes Pop” or “Infinite Conversations” (the latter a symposium series), he assembles material in ways that invite viewers to make their own connections. The archival tendency reflects his own obsessive collecting of interviews, documents, and artworks. **Curating Hans Ulrich Obrist’s way** involves treating the exhibition as a moment of concentrated accumulation, where many voices coexist. He is known for creating “exhibitions within exhibitions,” layering works from different eras and contexts. This method challenges linear narratives and encourages a rhizomatic reading. It also underscores his belief that the curator’s role is to preserve and transmit cultural memory—not in a static manner, but as a living, evolving resource.

5. The “One-Day Exhibition” and Ephemeral Strategies

In contrast to the blockbuster long-running show, Obrist has championed the one-day exhibition as a radical curatorial form. These fleeting presentations—sometimes lasting only a few hours—prioritise urgency and spontaneity. Examples include the “Day” series at the Serpentine or the “One-Day Exhibition” project that travels to multiple cities. For Obrist, **ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist** include a deep appreciation for the

ephemeral. He argues that the short duration forces artists and audiences to engage more intensely, without the comfort of permanence. It also aligns with his interest in performance, conversation, and events as exhibition forms. By removing the temporal security, he highlights the performative aspect of curating itself. The one-day exhibition becomes a statement against commodification and for experience. It is a testament to his belief that curating is not about conservation but about activation.

6. The “Curator as Mediator”: Writing, Publishing, and Networks

Obrist is an exceptionally prolific writer and publisher. He has authored dozens of book-form conversations, co-edited catalogues, and maintains a constant stream of essays. For him, writing is another mode of curation. The **ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist**extend beyond the gallery walls into text. His books, such as the “A Brief History of Curating” series or “The World of Curating,” are curated spaces where voices from the past and present meet. He also founded the “UOVO” publishing imprint and has been instrumental in making curatorial discourse accessible. This textual practice is not separate from his exhibitions; it is integral. He often says that “exhibitions are a form of writing” and conversely, that his books are exhibitions. Through publishing, he builds networks of knowledge that transcend geographic and disciplinary borders. His interviews are collected in volumes that serve as reference works for new generations of curators. This synthesis of oral and written culture is a hallmark of his methodology.

6.1 The Importance of the “Interview Book” as Curatorial Object

Obrist’s interview books are unique curatorial objects. They are not simple transcriptions but edited, indexed, and contextualised compilations. He often includes facsimiles of correspondence, photographs, and marginal notes, creating a multi-layered reading experience. This **curatorial approach**treats the printed page as an exhibition space where ideas are displayed and juxtaposed. The books are designed to be “portable exhibitions,” allowing readers to wander through conversations at their own pace. By publishing such volumes, he extends the reach of his curatorial work beyond the limited time and geography of an exhibition. It is a democratic gesture, making high-level dialogue available to a global audience. The interview book format also reflects his interest in “marginalia” and the unfinished—texts that invite further conversation rather than closed arguments.

7. Ethical Dimensions: Generosity and Inclusion

Underpinning all these strategies is a deep ethical commitment to generosity and inclusion. Obrist places great value on listening—to artists, to the public, to voices from outside the mainstream. His **ways of curating**are characterised by an openness to the unexpected. He often invites younger or lesser-known artists to share space with established figures, creating a platform for emergence. His relentless travel and correspondence are driven by a desire to bridge gaps and build community. He has spoken about the curator’s responsibility to counteract the accelerating pace of the art world and the risk of amnesia. Therefore, he archives, interviews, and preserves with a sense of urgency. This ethical layer distinguishes his practice: it is not just about producing exhibitions but about fostering a more inclusive, interconnected cultural ecosystem. In a time of polarisation, his model of continuous dialogue offers a hopeful counterbalance.

Conclusion

Hans Ulrich Obrist’s curatorial practice is a rich tapestry of dialogue, accumulation, collaboration, and ephemerality. The **ways of curating Hans Ulrich Obrist**are not a rigid system but an evolving set of principles that foreground connection, attention, and generosity. From the marathon interview to the one-day exhibition, from the humble notebook to the global publishing network, he has expanded the definition of what a curator can be. His work reminds us that curating is never passive—it is an active, relational, and creative act that shapes how we see the world. For those who seek to understand contemporary curatorial practice, Obrist

provides not only a model but an invitation: to listen more, to connect more, and to treat every encounter as a potential exhibition. His legacy is not a single show but an entire methodology—a living, breathing way of being in the world with art.

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