

Why do it Chinese Version?

Hu Yuanxing interviews Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hu Fang

Transcribed by Mo Xiaofei



PART ONE: In the cab from the SOHO Building to Timezone 8 Bookshop, 798 art district, Beijing, 16:10-16:35 pm, November 13, 2007

Hans Ulrich Obrist: So here is the do it Chinese version. We are in a cab. This is an interview on the move.

Hu Yuanxing: I would like to know about the initiation of the Chinese version of do it. In the preface of do it Chinese version, you mentioned it began at a dinner in 2004.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Are we recording already?



Hu Fang: Yes. I remember that you introduced the English version of do it to me during a dinner in Guangzhou. At that time I had just finished a project

together with Zhang Wei called Object System: Doing Nothing, and you actually invited me to make a contribution for the English version. We talked about the idea of “doing nothing,” which is a kind of Chinese perspective on do it from a philosophical level in that “do” actually could be “doing nothing”. . . so we were exchanging many different ideas, then we decided that we should first of all translate and introduce at least a part of the English version of do it in Art World magazine.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Exactly. You started it all with Art World. It is interesting because a learning system that can change with time is almost in the DNA of do it, it’s sort of at the core of do it. It started in 1993, from a conversation with Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier and we were thinking about how we could do exhibitions made by instructions and recipes. I was in my mid-20s at the time and I had just started as a curator on my kitchen shows and a couple of other exhibitions. I was wondering how I could do an exhibition that would continue my whole life. Wherever I go, whatever I do, it will always continue to evolve, and I will gain knowledge and become maybe, hopefully, more intelligent.

When I started to do exhibitions, I was still very much immersed in a kind of Western art paradigm because I lived in Paris, in Switzerland, and I grew up with an education in Western art. However, it already started to become, in the twentieth century, polyphony-centred with seismic shifts towards the East. Huang Yongping was one of the first Chinese artists I met, and because I had a grant from the Cartier Foundation in 1991, he was my neighbour, and then I met Shen Yuan, Fe Dawei, Chen Zhen, Yan Pei Ming, and Hou Hanru. Ever since, there has been an increasing interest in Chinese art. And the idea emerged for me that we need to develop exhibitions that could include my own research as well as local research. Wherever do it is exhibited, local artists are invited, not only to realize the instructions but also to add new instructions to the project. So then, around 1996, we translated the instructions of do it, which was then quite small, into eight languages, and sent the book through AFAA, a branch of the French Ministry of Culture, to many



Tsui Kuanyu: The Premise Is What Binds the World Together? (2006)

Image one: Imagination is the foundation upon which we construct this world--it can make anything impossible possible, or vice versa. Image two: Performance--commoditizing oneself can be gratifying. Revealing one's private domain can be a means to engage oneself in public affairs. As media and contemporary life are inseparable, our everyday lives become a series of performances. To live is to perform. Image three: Consumerism--instead of following our real needs, we're driven by relentless simulated wants to seek fulfillment for our everyday lives

countries all over the world. It was picked up by the University of Bangkok. We did it together with artists Chitti Kasemkitvatana, Surasi Kusolwong, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. In the exhibition do it Bangkok in 1996, which was very important to my whole trajectory, the dynamics of Bangkok's art scene came clear to me, and it led to the exhibition Cities on the Move that I curated with Hou Hanru. Cities on the Move pushed the idea of the exhibition as a learning system further; the show kept changing and grew over several years. And then do it is almost always continuing, do it never stops. So basically, after Bangkok it started happening in Australia, all over Europe, in northern Europe and southern Europe, in Italy, in Sweden, and then we started around 2000 a big do it version with Independent Curators International in the United States. It was 1998 or 1999 and it toured to thirty museums in the U.S. and Canada. So after this the archive grew because each time it happens somewhere I add new artists: Thai artists, American artists, European artists . . .

It was in 2003 or 2004 when the English book came out through E-Flux, and Hu Fang started to discuss with me why it had never happened in China. Because it has been in so many places, this was somehow a paradox. It was from Hu Fang's discussion that the idea really emerged. It is interesting because when you do a group exhibition, you put it in a box and send it to the next city. It is somehow a homogenizing approach. But do it is the opposite of imposition, do it is always self-organized, it only happens if local organizers or local curators or local artists want to do it. Like the time in Bangkok or ten years later in China, somebody wants to do it, and then local artists get invited. This time Hu Fang, Chinese artists, and artists of Chinese descent provided the instructions. So it's producing a whole new chapter in the story of do it. Actually, in this sense, I'm very excited because since there are twenty-five new instructions, it's almost the most significant and biggest edition that we have produced so far for do it. In addition, this book will produce another book because the Chinese instructions have yet to be translated into English. So we are going to translate it into English and make a little book of the new Chinese instructions next year. As you see, the process never stops, it has only just begun.

Hu Fang: Considering all these philosophical approaches to do it, it's extremely interesting to see how do it is integrated into different contexts. And within the Chinese context, it's interesting to

see how the do it proposals open a door to different kinds of performances, thus open a door to different understandings of life's processes, that is to say, they are proposals for the "possibility of life"; I think there are lots of performative elements within the conceptual approach of do it that are quite connected to the Chinese philosophical achievement of the integration between thought and practice. I think this is a very interesting issue in our discussion, it is very much linked to life itself, and step by step we have achieved the publication of do it Chinese version.

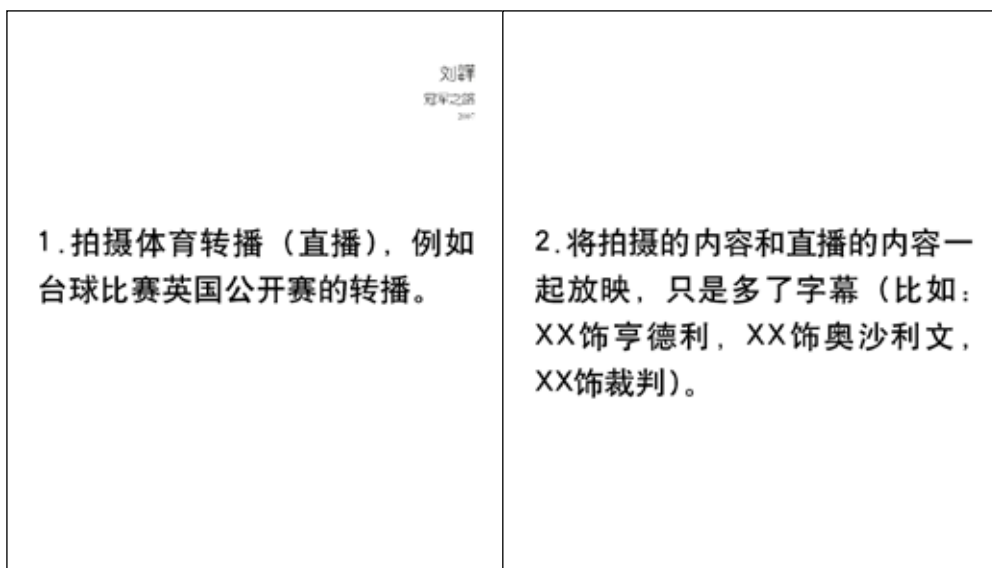
Hans Ulrich Obrist: I brought together the first twelve instructions in the mid-90s. They were also translated into Russian and Chinese, but the Chinese translator made a mistake with my text. I said do it was related to the readymade "motherwork," when Marcel Duchamp sent his sister an instruction for a piece on her balcony in Argentina. The Chinese translator got it wrong and said the readymade was already made and created by Paul Cezanne. That was a funny translation mistake in the first do it.

When you have a musical score, you can basically interpret it. John Cage talked about an open score. If we think about exhibitions and art in a moment of material reality, everything can become integrated. With installations, objects, and photography there is a limited lifespan with a decided moment when the material disintegrates; this is true even with buildings in architecture. If a building became invalid, we would have to rebuild according to the instructions and plans of the architect. So in fifty or one hundred years people could redo it. It's in the archives. Now do it is out with a couple of thousand copies, and you can imagine in fifty years somebody might decide to do it. So it's a different way that art can travel. Art can travel through time and through objects. We tried to utilize the way that music travels. I'm not saying that this is the only way that art can travel, it's just one way of travelling. It's a parallel reality.

The interesting thing is that when we did the first version of do it in the 90s, the eminent poet Seamus Heaney sent back a fax with my invitation where he just crossed it out in handwriting, and said "nothing doing."

Then I invited Hu Fang. The invitation was based on his novel, Shopping Utopia, which I see very much in the way of Georges Perec. I always think Hu Fang is sort of the new Georges Perec of China. Oulipo, which was Perec's idea, was a movement in France in the 1960s that also included Raymond Queneau and Harry Matthew who was the only American participant. And his poems basically reinvent literature by proposing new rules of the game. It is very much related to what do it is, which also in some kind of way proposes different rules of a game or an exhibition. Oulipo is always in our minds. I invited Hu Fang to do it and he is a very important addition to the do it project. He came up with this contribution to the book that is "doing nothing," exactly. Indeed, it created the beginning of the dialogue. It's an interesting paradox that out of "doing nothing" the result was such a big book.

Hu Fang: It's truly an interesting paradox. I like the energy when art projects function not only as conceptual experiments, but also raise constructive proposals for the actions. especially when the whole of Chinese society has been transformed so rapidly by a consumption ideology, there are lots of things that urgently need to be reconsidered. in the meantime, this kind of awareness should not only remain at the conceptual level, but also should lead to certain ways of how to "do it." I feel a kind of urgent sense that we should "do it." It was the feeling at the very beginning of our discussion and I think it forms the direction of the Chinese version.



Liu Wei: The Road to Championship (2007)

Left: Record a live-broadcast sports program, for instance, the UK Snooker Championship.

Right: Play the recorded program along with the live-broadcast, with the added subtitles, for example, "XX starred as Hendry, XX starred as O'Sullivan, and XX starred as the referee".

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I also want to say that we live in a moment of event-culture. Usually things move very fast. We welcome something, and then we move on to the next thing, and then we do something else. What's important for do it is that its the opposite of this fast event culture, it grows slowly and organically, and we are working for ten or twenty years on the same thing, so I want to resist this one-time event based thing. We give it time. It's like layers, like stratification, like a growth to some extent if we think about it in material terms. We just spoke to Zheng Guogu who is building on his own land. It's something which is very slow growing and has organic layers that span over ten or twenty years on his land. This is in a material way. So I would say that, in an immaterial way, do it is similar to that, do it is an immaterial growth over ten or twenty years. Because it exists for so long, it evolves layer by layer. Artists react to other artists. Obviously artists are also changing their instructions. For example, Rosemarie Trockel says, "See page 48, 72 and 88 and 168 and do it again." The idea is that art can reflect other artists and it becomes somehow a system that can continue to grow. Hu Fang has a very interesting local interpretation of what do it means in China. In Latin America, when do it went from Mexico City to Bogota, and then to Chile, it again meant something very different. Because in Latin America it was of significance that do it was related to the core of performance art. The instruction art in the 1970s in the Latin American context was also very much related to the idea of a performative score. In the context of Europe, it has yet another meaning. So to some extent each time do it happens it has different meanings locally and it also gets interpreted locally in different ways. So in this sense, making an exhibition is like negotiating between the local and the global. Because we live in the context of globalization, it's the homogenizing forces of globalization that lead to the disappearance of difference. I think it's very important to engage in the global dialogue but to also have the possibility to produce, raise, and embrace difference. Do it could not have happened before globalization. What it means is that art today happens in all these different continents and it's all connected by email. But in a critical way, which does not eliminate the differences but actually multiplies and produces differences. It's an entry to producing difference

Hu Fang: I think it's perfect that we are having a conversation around the 798 art district, you actually can feel this kind of cultural industry sphere in China under the global impact. So it is really interesting if we also think about the environment that we are currently in.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Totally!

We have to mention that we saw by chance a poster announcing a Michelangelo Pistoletto show in Beijing, which brings up the following twist. Do it also has a long history in Italy. There are two versions of it in Italy. There is a very interesting anecdote about Pistoletto who was invited to join the project do it. He actually discovered the possibility that if somebody realizes a do it instruction at home or at an institution, it's for free; but if somebody wants to exhibit it publicly afterwards in a permanent space, one has to acquire the right to do so. So here we have different economies: it's not an economy of the object, but an economy of rights, of royalties. Again, it's almost like in music. In music you pay royalties. These are all things I am interested in, and they are still unexplored in the art world.

Hu Fang: In the meantime, we can also find many interesting perspectives from the Chinese contributions, which somehow are quite connected to what you have just mentioned.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Shall we go on to see the exhibition? And then go to the cafe for part two. This is the end of part one. The conversation has only just begun.

PART TWO: In Timezone 8 Cafe & Bookshop

Hu Yuanxing: I'm curious to know how do it corresponds with its transformation into other contexts. It was initiated in 1993, and you pointed out that do it is like a musical score, or even the archive as a score, so how does the project adapt to its transformation within a Chinese context?

Hans Ulrich Obrist: That's a very interesting question. The project changes with time. Since 1993, there has been an Australian version of do it, a Chinese version of do it, a Thai version of do it, a northern American version of do it, and a Mexican version of do it. You know, there are many different versions of do it.

During the last five or six years, there has been an online version of do it. And the online version allows feedback. So with the instructions on the Internet, users can propose their own interpretations. You can imagine all the different interpretations of do it that have evolved via the Internet.

At the same time, it is very much driven by the local organizers, and with Hu Fang and Zhang Wei we have together selected twenty-five artists. For example, the book sold out a year after the original English version came out, so we reprinted the book, but in the meantime we have new instructions. So you can basically say that was book one and this is the Chinese update. Today alone we have three new instructions (from interviews I had with Chinese artists), and everyday there are more. Thinking is very much inspired by the update, and the backup. Backup and update, it's just like the computer. To some extent, do it is following the model of 1960s conceptual exhibitions. Seth Siegelaub and Lucy Lippard were the two great pioneers of the conceptual exhibitions that had something to do with the immaterial relations in art. But at the same time, today is a very different moment from the 1960s, and I think that should be taken into account. It's repetition and difference.

Hu Fang: It has always reflected different historical moments, and the different energy within different those historical moments. For me, the real life of the project is based on how the whole



Xu Zhen, Xu Zhen's Art (2007)

To showcase my work in all the art museums, art galleries, arts centres on Earth, including any physical spaces pertaining to art exhibiting, on the same day. If this proposal, by any chance, can be materialized, I'd like to ask the director of Do It to inform me in advance, for I'll need to do some preparation. I'm Xu Zhen. Thank you.

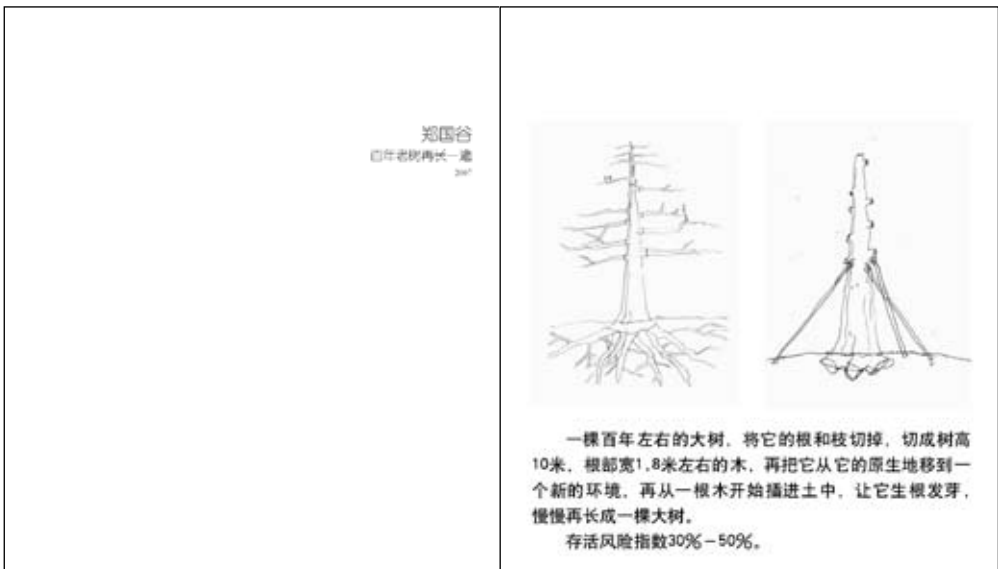
structure can have enough flexibility to cope with the situation, and that's how do it creates a space that allows so many artists from different contexts to get involved in it.

Hu Yuanxing: Do you have any ideas about presenting do it differently in China, not only in book form, but also in a physical space?

Hans Ulrich Obrist: It could be interesting because so far it has not yet happened. Do it is not conceived as a managed tour that gets sent around the world. I always find tours problematic as they are very much dependent upon a master plan, and that is homogenizing. A travelling group show that does not change is problematic because you do something and then impose it on the rest of the world. Do it is a critique of these types of group exhibitions. It is always self-organized, which means I would never send it somewhere. Instead, it only happens when someone wants to do it, when there is a desire. You in China today may think there should be a do it in the museums, but it's not something that I would instigate.

Hu Fang: The interesting thing is that the do it Chinese version totally arose from a spontaneous discussion, so it is very much about how to "do it" in an organic way, it's always driven by a certain level of necessity in your life process. I'm interested in the questions of what is the meaning of an exhibition, what is the necessity of an exhibition," and how an exhibition can insert a new presence into our surroundings and build up a new relationship with reality. Since the whole of society has already become a huge spectacle, a live exhibition, these kinds of questions naturally lead to the searching out of new models for an exhibition.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: At a certain moment I was inspired by the idea of how we could introduce self-organization into the curatorial master plan. The whole idea of do it is that whenever it takes place somewhere, there are things that happen to the project that are unpredictable. It has lots to do with chance and also with local necessities. Obviously, each time there is a version of do it happening, a new dialogue certainly happens. In this case it's with Hu Fang and a whole new list of artists who have been invited. In this respect, I would say the project never stops, it has



Zheng Guogu: The Relocation and Growth of a Hundred-Year-Old Tree. (2007)
Choose a hundred-year-old tree, remove its roots and branches so that the tree trunk measures ten metres long, with its root base approximately 1.8 metres wide, then relocate the tree trunk from its original base to a new environment. Plant the log into earth, let the roots sprout, and slowly flourish into a large tree again. The survival rate: 30%-50%

only just begun. It is a kind of growing archive that you can imagine may happen in the future in many other places, and then it might have a moment in which it stops. Years later, it could be rediscovered by someone. This is the idea that perhaps art can travel through time, not only via objects, but maybe via different channels and different circuits that are not necessarily related to the objects. Again, let's take music as an example. Music has travelled through the centuries with written scores on paper and through oral transmission.

It's interesting that for the participating artists, do it actually raises the issue of what might be the economy of the score, which may be very different from the economy of the object. You can also say that the whole book, the whole process, is deeply inspired by the poet and writer and philosopher, Edouard Glissant, who developed the idea of *mondialité* that, within the extremely strong impact of globalization, is basically a negotiation to produce difference and variety, and to resist homogenization. At the same time, there are global forms of dialogue that work to make difference disappear. *Mondialité* embraces the possibility and the potential of the global dialogue, but it does so in a way that does not lead to the disappearance of difference. A global dialogue, which is an engine for difference, would be a credit to *mondialité*. Edouard Glissant is the father of do it.

Hu Fang: I would like to take the do it proposal from the Chinese artist Zheng Guogu as a metaphor in response your previous question. It's called "how to rebirth a hundred year old tree," and the instruction tells people how to transplant and create a new life of a hundred year old tree after it's moved to a new place. The artist points out the risk index of survival is from 30% to 50%, and for me, the risk index is probably the most attractive part of the do it project. It doesn't guarantee success, yet, nevertheless. it does create a space for migration .

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