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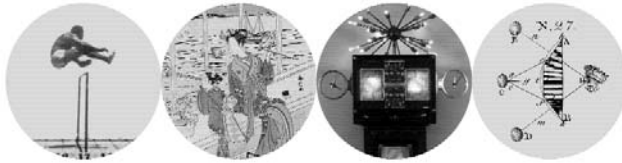
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Futures, Cities

Hans Ulrich Obrist

Daniel Birnbaum, one of the sharpest of our present generation of art writers, had this to say of the future: 'If the future existed in a concrete sense that could be discerned by a "better brain," we wouldn't be so seduced by the past. But the future,' he observes via Nabakov, 'has no such reality. It is but a "spectre of thought"' (Birnbaum, 2005). Any attempt to forecast the future is both a provocation to rethink the past, and an opportunity to better come to terms with the present. In art, working through past gestures is, of course, hardly novel. In the 1960s, one observes Pop exemplars such as Lichtenstein painting their way through abstract expressionism; before that, Cubists confronting primitivism; and on and on. For brevity's sake, perhaps we can simply concur with Duchamp that art is ultimately a *game*, a continually articulated struggle between the present, the past and the future. In this model, the only constant is *change* itself: this is a vision of history under perennial negotiation; historical truth as forever in situ. Visions of the future across almost all phenomena: (a) evolve over time; and (b) are many. The future, in other words, is both variant and plural.

Rewind 50 years. At mid-century, Jacques Fresco emerged as one of America's pre-eminent engineers and is today a well-known futurologist. Trained in industrial design, he worked for both the government and private sector as a research designer and churned out an astounding roll-call of inventions: systems for noiseless aircraft; three-wheeled cars; and proposals for floating cities and prefab houses. His aesthetic has become perhaps one of the most clichéd visions of tomorrow, an Epcot Center meets *The Jetsons* picture of white orb-like structures, geodesic domes and pristinely choreographed urban planning. Fresco's future may, of course, seem outmoded and his writings have been subject to critique for their fascistic undertones of order and similitude, but his contributions are etched in the popular psyche and his eco-friendly concepts continue to influence our present generation of progressive architects, city planners and designers. In the West, countless other visions of the future have been expounded before, since, and in conjunction with, Fresco. The Italian futurists, circa the 1910s, urged through

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manifestos, poems, paintings and sculptures a politically charged future of man, machine and power; in the 1920s and 1930s, De Stijl promoted an endless primary colour play on geometrical variation; the Bauhaus argued for a future of economizing rationality; in the 1950s, Ad Reinhardt spoke of his black paintings as the final ever paintings; and beginning in the 1960s, English architect Cedric Price advanced an evolutionary model of building premised upon flexibility, change and renewal. Although many of his concepts never materialized outside the studio, Price is receiving a renaissance in architecture today and I am particularly indebted to his progressive thinking. My own practice draws considerably upon Cedric Price's future of dynamism and his disregard for permanence – his structures often had shelf-lives and once their utility expired, he urged their destruction.

The post-1960 art world has given way to an era of innumerable futures, relativism and constant negotiation. To single out a few of the most salient trends, Marshall McLuhan's famous media theorizing of the late 1960s evokes one rather Utopian vision of tomorrow: the 'Global Village'; in a similar, though less well-known, tract, Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* of 1970 articulated the TV as an emancipatory forum for connectivity and viewer engagement. 'It is now obvious that we are entering a completely new video environment and image-exchange life-style,' Youngblood wrote. 'The videosphere will alter the minds of men and the architecture of their dwellings.' These sentiments gained considerable traction among Fluxus activities of the time and a first generation of video art such as that of Nam June Paik. They also resurfaced in much 1990s' globalization and technological discourse. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism at the turn of the decade presaged a moment of renewed and unprecedented internationalism, and a reworking of McLuhanism into 'new media' hype. The 1990s witnessed artists and art institutions experimenting with the internet's novel distributive flows for the first time, and it has come to be regarded as the 'Biennial Decade', a qualifier which refers to the unseating of the hierarchically dominant institutional roles of museums and galleries by the 'global' biennial. This exhibition model has been in place since the late 19th century but it has grown precipitously in roughly the past 15 years; it represents a by-product of the rise of independent curating over these years and a pragmatic on-the-run resolution to the organization of exhibitions and art projects in contexts without entrenched precedents, and/or often in the absence of sophisticated contemporary art institutions of their own. During this period, biennials have cropped up across the globe and are especially noticeable in emerging economies, from Cuba to Korea, Senegal, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates and beyond; transience and cross-cultural dialogue are bywords of this moment, and discussion fora and real-time information distributing systems made possible by the internet have drawn them into widespread recognition.

These trends bear witness to the art world's pragmatism, at the very historical moment that people and institutions within the field of contemporary art are more geographically diffuse than ever before; offering a comparatively innovative, adaptable and speedy way in which to exhibit, discuss and buy art for

today's 'global' consumer, and enterprising collectors filling a presentation void otherwise burdened by slow administrative processes and entrenched procedures at museums. The risk is that this all lapses into mere opportunistic shuffling and recedes the moment the market cools; the reality is that the art world is likely to be treading in this general direction for some time to come. In a collection of short fiction about the future of art, solicited by artist Rita McBride (2003) from over a dozen fellow artists, curators and writers, the majority mention biennials and triennials, though none discuss art fairs, a testament to the prolific growth of these events in the years since this publication; many dismiss the relevance of Western cultural epicentres in favour of those in China, Japan and, in certain sci-fi variants, outer space – a vision consistent with today's numerous cultural expansions into Russia, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America and beyond; and a couple raise perhaps the most interesting issue of art's future as codified data. Laura Cottingham, in her contribution set in 2199, refers to the 20th century as the last century to believe absolutely in the permanence of art objects. She goes on to call it 'The Century of Grasping' and dismisses its 'false hope for permanence' and its retrograde fetishization of objects over ideas. Her vision dovetails with the legacy of the 1960s era of conceptual art and the prioritization of information, intellectual property and systems-based analyses. It also squares with the open-source movement famously set in train during the 1990s by computer programmers such as Richard Stallman and Linus Torvald, inventor of Linux. This is a future of viral P2P interfaces and user-led progress. The art world, predicated on an economic system of exclusivity and artificially erected boundaries to entry, has been slow to adapt but, as with the music and film industries, adaptation is probably only a matter of time.

My own variant and plural curatorial strategies have emerged somewhere between these dominant spaces and trends. I have contributed to the organization of dozens of biennials and scores of traveling exhibitions but, wherever possible, I have tried to avoid the top-down blockbuster model. I share with Cedric Price a vision of the future under a state of impermanence – under constant negotiation, change, adaptation. Since its inception in 1993, for example, *Do It* has traveled to over 40 international venues and offers a model of art and exhibition making as the following-through of a variable set of instructions. Unlike the Krens vision, perhaps the pre-eminent challenge encompassing this project was concerned with how to perpetuate a show that *no* big museum wanted to touch: because it wasn't the 'real' thing, because it was about instructions and interpretations, not concrete 'works', it never hit the primary institutional radar. By consequence, *Do It* was a huge risk and it was perpetuated only through an amazing grassroots mechanism that ricocheted across Europe, Asia, the Americas, and so on. Ultimately, *Do It* has to do with critical mass: it is an unwieldy project and has incorporated hundreds of artists and thousands of accompanying documents; it's a dynamic learning system with feedback loops.

I like to think similarly of *Utopia Station*, an exhibition I co-curated with art historian Molly Nesbit and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, which premiered at the

2003 Venice Biennale. After opening in Italy, with contributions by nearly 100 artists, the project has since resurfaced on two different occasions at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, and the 2005 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, among other destinations. Each time, the rules of the game change: sometimes it is a poster-project, and at others it becomes a mobile unit (such as at Porto Alegre) or a new architecture (such as in Munich). Between *Do It, Utopia Station* and, most recently, *China Power Station* – which brings together nearly two dozen of the most innovative young video- and filmmakers now working in China, and was sited in 2006 in the historic Battersea Power Station on London's South Bank before traveling on to the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo and its future migration to Beijing in 2008 – was the project *Cities on the Move*, my earliest extensive exploration of a future of cultural innovation outside of the Western European/North American axis, focusing on the dynamics of the Asian megalopolis. Curated with Hou Hanru, *Cities on the Move* opened in Vienna in 1997 and over the course of the next two years ping-ponged to a half dozen sites around Europe, to Bordeaux, New York, London, Helsinki, Copenhagen and Bangkok. Again, importantly, the exhibition changed dramatically from one context to the next, and became an engine of site-specific architectural collaborations between key protagonists in both Asia and the West – Ole Scheeren and Shigeru Ban, for instance. We were interested in the notion of the impossibility of creating a synthetic image of the city and how to address complexity. A lot of self-organization was involved in making a group show that grew, then evolved. It was an exhibition that presented amazing artists, architects and other practitioners from Asian cities working with ideas of the city, especially the incredible mutation of Asian cities in the '90s – a source of great inspiration and material for many practitioners – practitioners who were also co-producers of this urban reality. The exhibition became a growing laboratory and so, from station to station, from city to city, it learned, it developed, with new artists and architects joining, like a complex dynamic system – again, a feedback loop, in part inspired by Gordon Pask's cybernetics.

Cities on the Move also marked the start of my collaboration with Rem Koolhaas. Hou Hanru and I went to see him in Rotterdam. He only had 10 minutes to see us, but he said 'tomorrow, appointment in Hong Kong', so the next day we flew to Hong Kong and had an amazing dinner, an amazing evening with Rem Koolhaas, during which he introduced us to young architects from Hong Kong and mainland China. It was just before the handover of Hong Kong. From there he gave us addresses and we went to Singapore and met Tai Soo Kim, William Lim, and continued our journey to Korea, Indonesia, and all over Asia. It was really this one evening that triggered *Cities on the Move*, and it was immediately apparent that we could not do an exhibition simply about Asian art but rather it would have to be a transdisciplinary exhibition about 'the city'. The collaboration then intensified when the exhibition came to London and Rem Koolhaas and his colleague Ole Scheeren (with whom he now runs CCTV in China) did *Cities on the Move* with us at the Hayward Gallery, creating the exhibition design and inventing completely new typologies. Then, two years later, after I had

invited Rem Koolhaas into the art context, as it were, the scenario was inverted and we worked together on *Mutations* – a millennium exhibition in 2000 in France that Rem Koolhaas was asked to curate, about the future of cities, and he invited Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter and myself to co-curate the show with him. It was here that I realized a project on the *Invisible City* – *Sonic City and Rumour City* were a part of that. Rem Koolhaas showed his Lagos research; Stefano Boeri showed his *Uncertain States of Europe (USE)* project.

These projects on futures and cities coincide with the development of the ongoing Art Basel Conversations on the future of the museum, part of a think tank with Samuel Keller, Peter Vetsch, Isabela Mora, James Rondeau, Maria Finders and, for the Beijing event, Jonathan Napack, the idea behind which is not only to show a variety of museum models for the 21st century, but to also put these museums and museum models into contact. When we worked on the panel of the future of the museum in China, it very quickly became clear how fast the cultural sector in China is growing in size, scope and sophistication, obviously in parallel with the country's staggering pace of economic development. When one looks at these hundreds of new museums that are planned, it is very important to look at different models, to not only focus on the exterior aspect of museums, the kind of Bilbao Effect where one has a spectacular façade, but to also start to think about what, besides this hardware, could actually be the software of these museums. Architect Chang Yung-ho, who inaugurated the panel, emphasized very strongly the necessity of a variety of models, and mentioned some very different museums that he is working on, such as SMOCA (Small Museum of Contemporary Art) with Cai Guo-Qiang, which is a kind of very, very small recycling museum; and another museum with the stage designer Zhang Li, based on a collection of different architectures, where a city becomes a kind of museum; and then a very large-scale museum, a whole museum town he's working on in Sichuan province. Chaos Chen spoke about the museum as laboratory in relation to the past, the present and the future, as did Claire Hsu (director of the Asia Art Archive), who talked about the situation in Hong Kong, and a very strong resistance there to the idea of a single developer approaching or taking over the entire future of the museum discussion. Hou Hanru questioned that whole museum euphoria, and at the same time wondered if planning is no longer the only way, that maybe we are in a post-planning situation, where post-planning could also be the place from which we think about notions of self-organization. But he was also obviously warning against these many new museums being built with zero programs. Here, the artist Huang Yong Ping who, besides his experience of many exhibitions has also been an advisor to the Xiamen government in discussions, proposed an inversion of the situation: to think first about what we really need, what the art really needs, and only then to start to build. He was also talking a lot about preservation and memory, and the necessity of reactivating old structures, very much reminding me of something the great historian Eric Hobsbawm always said: that, in response to this incredible amnesia, we need to organize 'a protest against forgetting'.

Extracts from **Hans Ulrich Obrist**, unpublished notes on the Art Basel Conversations Beijing event, 12 September 2006; 'The Future', a presentation at the inaugural New Yorker Conference, *2012: Stories From the Near Future*, 6–7 May 2007; and notes on the 24-hour Interview Marathon, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2006 (publication forthcoming), edited by susan pui san lok.

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