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Ways of Curating Hans Ulrich Obrist



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Hans Ulrich Obrist

with Asad Raza



PENGUIN BOOKS

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With Alighiero Boetti

In 1986, during a school trip to Rome, I decided to go my own way and visit someone whom Fischli and Weiss had told me was one of their heroes: Alighiero Boetti. At the time of my first visit, he was working on ideas relating to maps and map-making. Boetti had an epiphany about maps in 1971, and had then begun an extensive and labour-intensive project, making embroidered maps (*Mappa*) of the world. He collaborated with embroiderers in Afghanistan and later Pakistan to produce these extraordinary works, travelling to these countries on many occasions but also collaborating at a distance, especially following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. These collaborations intertwined aesthetic and political concerns, craftsmanship and the physical journey of the artist, as well as the negotiation of linguistic and physical borders. In the midst of 1989's global realignments and paroxysm, Boetti's *World Map* appeared with the immaculate sense of timing.

The meeting with Boetti in 1986 changed my life in a day. One of the first things he advised me to do when in conversation with artists was always to ask them about their unrealized projects. I have done it ever since. Another striking thing about Boetti, which was immediately noticeable, was the rapidity of both his speech and actions. This was especially encouraging for me, as I was often being criticized in Switzerland for

speaking too quickly. Here was someone with whom I had to struggle to keep up. In his studio, with typical velocity, Boetti began to question me about my goals. Because of my recent experience with Fischli and Weiss, I replied that I would like to curate exhibitions, but that I was unsure of how to start.

Boetti told me that if I wanted to curate exhibitions, then I should under no circumstances do what everybody else was doing – just giving the artists a certain room and suggesting that they fill it. What would be more important would be to talk to the artists and ask them which projects they could not realize under existing conditions. Ever since, this has been a central theme of all my exhibitions. I don't believe in the creativity of the curator. I don't think that the exhibition-maker has brilliant ideas around which the works of artists must fit. Instead, the process always starts with a conversation, in which I ask the artists what their unrealized projects are, and then the task is to find the means to realize them. At our first meeting, Boetti said curating could be about making impossible things possible.

Boetti was also the first person to encourage me to read the work of Édouard Glissant, who became my most important theoretical influence. Boetti was attracted to Glissant's preference for differences rather than homogeneity, to the fact that however much maps can be totalizing visions, often tainted with imperialist ambition, they are also always in need of revision. Boetti, accordingly, understood that his maps only recorded a temporary state of world affairs and could not remain accurate over time. As his partner, Annemarie Sauzeau, explained to me: 'flags change design and colour after wars. At that point, Alighiero's maps have to be redesigned.' Maps enfold both the existing and the yet-to-be. This is the inherently metamorphosing nature of maps and map-making; maps are always a door to the future. Boetti's *Mappa* prefigured the cross-cultural

exchange and dialogue (signalled by the text on their borders appearing in Italian or Farsi) that would soon become the stock-in-trade of the rapidly globalizing art world.

This leads to Boetti's other obsession, with the twin poles of order and disorder. He conceptualized systems of order and disorder in his works, in which the one always simultaneously implies the other. Boetti once compiled a list of one thousand of the world's longest rivers, published as a book in 1977. It is a very thick book, a thousand pages long, with many references to river sources on each page. But, due to the meandering, changing course of rivers, their length can never be precisely established. Thus what the book quixotically reveals is that there is no absolutely fixed length of a river, nor a single reliable source, but rather multiple and varying sources. This project involved immense geographic and scientific research, but with a preordained ambiguity in the results. The order that has been created is, at the same time, disorder.

Soon after I arrived at his door, we were in Boetti's car, racing through the streets of Rome so he could introduce me to other artists. He mentioned that a young curator could find great value not only in working in a museum, a gallery, or on a biennial, but also in making artists' dreams come true. I think that was the most important mission he instilled in me. Boetti kept saying, 'Don't be a boring curator.' He told me that one of his main unrealized projects was to do an exhibition for one year in all the planes of an airline, so that they would be flying the exhibition around the world every day and, in some cases, returning each evening. And in this context he wanted to present a serial work that featured aeroplanes, in which you see one plane in the first image, and then you see more and more planes until the sky of the canvas is filled with them.

At the time, I was too young to help Boetti realize his

Respect ambition. But a few years later I told the (always uncapitalized) *museum in progress* in Vienna about this idea, and we got in contact with Austrian Airlines. The airline allowed us to feature Boetti's images of aeroplanes on a double-page spread in each issue of their magazine (which was published every two months) for one year, so we had six issues for the project. Then, one week before the first edition was going to be printed, Boetti sent me a telegram from Milan, where he was working on a large bronze sculpture, and said that the images in the magazine were not sufficient. We needed to add something more physical than the mere magazine page, he continued, and his idea was that we should create a jigsaw puzzle. Now, a puzzle featuring many aeroplanes in the sky would be very easy to solve – but a jigsaw of one monochrome blue and only one plane in it would take hours to solve.

And so we produced various jigsaws of the different aeroplane motifs, with escalating degrees of difficulty. They were exactly the size of the seat-back tables of the aircraft, and they were given away for free for a year on every flight of Austrian Airlines. The airline began with an edition of 40,000 and later reprinted the jigsaws. When they finally received the jigsaw featuring the image of only one plane in an expansive sky, it occurred to them that this might trigger a fear or dislike of flying, because none of the passengers would be able to solve it. The jigsaw couldn't even be solved on long-distance flights with several passengers working together. But it was already too late, and so the jigsaws were distributed in the planes regardless. After this experiment, Boetti not only asked me to come up with ideas for different kinds of exhibition space but also addressed to a different audience, to insert art into spaces where it normally isn't found; for example, today you can find the

jigsaws we did for Austrian Airlines at flea markets, as well as in art bookstores and on eBay.

These conversations with Boetti lay behind my first attempts to supplement existing art exhibitions by creating new formats. Of course, those projects lay somewhere in the future, but my first meeting with Boetti had been a revelation because he gave me a sense that there were still many unexplored horizons in working with artists. Through his drive and inspiration, I had glimpsed the ways I might become a curator and still create something new. Not only did he instill in me the necessity of urgency, but my first ideas of what might still urgently need doing.

Édouard Glissant, who was born on Martinique in 1928 and died in Paris on 3 February 2011, was one of the most important writers and philosophers of our time. He called attention to means of global exchange that do not homogenize culture but produce a difference from which new things can emerge. Andrei Tarkovsky once said that our times were characterized by the loss of rituals, but that it was important to have rituals in order to find our way back to ourselves on a regular basis. I have a ritual of reading in Glissant's books for fifteen minutes every morning. His poems, novels, plays and theoretical essays are a toolbox I use every day.

The history and landscape of the Antilles form the point of departure for Glissant's way of thinking. The first issue that preoccupied him was national identity in view of the colonial past. That is also the theme of his first novel, *La Lézarde* (1958; English: *The Ripening*, 1959 and 1985). He considered the blend of languages and cultures a decisive characteristic of Antillean identity. His native Creole was formed from a combination of the languages of the French colonial rulers and the African slaves; it contains elements of both but is itself something independent and unexpectedly new. On the basis of these insights Glissant later observed that there are similar cultural fusions all over the world. In the 1980s, in essay