

The Space of Dreams

MAYORAL

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INTERVIEW TO HANS ULRICH OBRIST

AFTER a few attempts to meet with Hans Ulrich Obrist in London, we finally do so during Art Basel, in one of the terraces of Liste Art Fair. The building had once been an old brewery and has wonderful views of the Swiss city which I enjoy while I wait for Hans Ulrich to finish a conversation with two young curators. He gives them guidelines for an exhibition at HangarBicocca in Milan.

He feels comfortable, in the sun. It is a beautiful day and he wears a blue suit without a tie, and sneakers. He wears a pair of big black glasses which give him a lot of personality. He switches from German to English, with some French words, when Francesco

Bonami calls (what a coincidence, as we are about to discuss the project they did together) they speak Italian, and when we say goodbye Hans Ulrich tells me he does not speak good Spanish but that he can read it.

Everyone greets him and he reciprocates cordially. It makes me realise how difficult it must be to visit an art fair like Liste or Art Basel when everyone recognises you and wants to explain, first hand, the proposals they present. I know it is a privilege to be able to talk with him about dreams for half an hour.

While he finishes his coffee latte, I take a last look at my notes and start the conversation.

Llucia Homs Before we start, I would like to thank you very much for agreeing to have this conversation here, in Basel, during the art fair.

Hans Ulrich Obrist It's a pleasure, yes.

LH As mentioned before, this conversation is aimed at dwelling into the *SOGNI/DREAMS* project for an interview that Mayoral Gallery, in Barcelona, has commissioned to me to be included in the catalogue of an exhibition on dreams.

with Llucia Homs, regarding Sogni/Dreams project in Basel, 14th June 2017

I would like to start with a historical moment: The project you undertook for the 48th Biennale di Venezia, in 1999, with Francesco Bonami. The project of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l'Arte, which was included as a *latere* event.

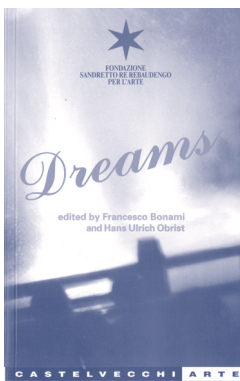
Vicenç Altaió, the curator of Mayoral's exhibition, entitled *THE SPACE OF DREAMS*, is developing a personal thesis around dreams, with some works that will be at the centre of the exhibition by Miró and Calder, Dalí and Duchamp, Magritte, that will lead him to Hamilton, Picasso and Chagall, and finally, the Catalan group Dau al Set, with Antoni Tàpies, Joan Ponç and Joan Brossa.

The filmmaker Albert Serra, a good friend of ours, will also collaborate conducting another conversation for the catalogue, just like ours.

Just to provide you with some background, the curator starts with the moment after World War One when artists were faced with the dichotomy of either realism or, Dadaism, the "irrational delirium", in Altaió own words. That new generation that emerges after the war and wishes to depart from the artistic system that works on the irrational and enters into the adventure of dreams.

In this framework, *Trajectoire du Rêve* by André Breton is a work that provides clarity to anyone working in this field, together with the documents, texts and drawings of an entire artistic community working on the oneiric, put together by Breton in 1938.

In my view, your project with Bonami retakes the dream spirit and takes this challenge based on projecting the representation of dreams to contemporary artists. In your own words: "*Dreams is a project that wants to dream about realizable and unrealizable dreams and make them real and possible.*"



Dreams
Edited by Francesco Bonami
and Hans Ulrich Obrist

The project that Bonami and Obrist carried out during the Venice Biennale in 1999 starts with a letter sent to a hundred artists previously selected. In the letter they made a statement of intent: "It is very often the case that real ideas transmute into unrealizable dreams. We rarely think about our dreams as a necessary possibility for our present." They went on to explain that Patrizia Sandretto had dreamt of a place where contemporary art could find fertile grounds, where ideas could become reality. Following this idea, Bonami and Obrist asked artists to send them one of their dreams in a format no longer than 300 words to print a booklet. It would include the dreams of some of the most prominent artist of the international scene. All those who attended the Biennale got one, took a look at it and read it. Most of them kept it jealously.

LH Did Breton's book have any influence in your project? Can anyone talk about dream without referring to Breton?

HUO For me, there are so many paths or ways to dream. My connection has always been H el ene Cixous, because she made this wonderful book where she wrote down her dreams every morning, then she woke up and edited. Of course Freud is always there, but dreams existed before Freud, and they exist after Freud. I think in a way it is a longer story.

This book with Francesco Bonami—it is funny because he just called me before. We wanted to do a book which just looks at dreams. For me it was fascinating because at that time I didn't really sleep. And when you don't sleep, you do not dream. For this reason I started to sleep at a certain moment. Now I sleep quite normally, six-seven hours every night, and I have a night assistant, so the insomnia continues through my assistant. He works for me all night long. He comes to our house at 11 pm and then works for me until midnight. Then I go to sleep, he continues to work, and in the morning I can see the research that has been done: the transcriptions, the edits... For me it is a way of liberating time to sleep, which means I now dream. Like H el ene Cixous, I have started to write down my dreams every day, inspired by her.

In a way, the booklet we did at the time had actually a lot to do with this idea of doing exhibitions in book form. I have always liked this idea that one would ask artists to do something for a book. I also worked closely on that with Joan Brossa, who has been a great hero and inspiration for me. He needs to be remembered more, he is such an important visual poet and artist.

We did a book with instructions, like do it yourself instructions. Then I did a book, an unrealized project, where I asked a hundred artists to send me an unrealized project and that became a book. With Bonami we asked a hundred and something artists to send us a dream, and that became a book.

*At this moment, Hans Ulrich picks up the book **Sogni/Dreams** which I have left on the table and opens it by a random page. He reads it and his eyes light up. He reads some pages to himself and reads out loud some other ones. There is a smile on his face. It seems that the project brings back good memories.*

The idea is that they are like mobile exhibitions. They are very inspired by sixties' projects, like Lucy Lippard when she did the cards. The reason being that these works do not really exist outside the book. The artists did them for the book, they are little text pieces. Some artists were very abstract and philosophical. Doug Aitken dreamed of a mountain with no summit. Other artists thought about the cartography of the dreams, because that is another way of talking about the dreams. Matthew Barney talked about dreams between 1972 and 1973; Mill Valley had very precise and detailed dreams with the cabinets and the paper-towel dispenser. In the case of Louise Bourgeois, "*The Dream of the Superstition Contradicted is a Nightmare*". Cattelan played with the idea of not dreaming and not sleeping. Emilio Prini, "*Cari Obrist e Bonami*

vi voglio tanto bene e mi dico Vostro figlio affezionatissimo Emilio Prini". It is like a conceptual book. There were other problems of dissemination. Steve McQueen: "*In my dreams; I dream that my memory is erased, every time I see, smell, hear and taste beauty. Joy is repetition.*" For some people it was more like a philosophical statement about what is a dream. For some people it is a formula. John Latham wrote about the formula. We printed fifty thousand copies of this book.

LH Yes, which is an amazing number of booklets.

HUO The Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l'arte gave them away in a sort for 5,000 lire (at the time, two dollars fifty, two euros) -its price was still in lire. We gave them away for free at the opening of Szeemann's Biennale.

LH Was the Venice Biennale the right place for that exercise ? For that reflection ?

HUO Yes. The Venice Biennale was the proper place. We wanted it to be sold very cheap and we also wanted it to be given away to the art crowd. In Venice you have the international crowd. We chose Venice because in a way it is a city of dreams. It is a city that wants to survive transforming the past into the future, nostalgia into necessity, time into activity. We distributed fifty thousand copies.

LH Yes.

HUO It was also interesting because the Rebaudengo Foundation had just opened its building in 2000. It was also an opportunity for them to make noise about it.

LH Did you achieve the repercussion you were expecting to have with this book, with this project?

HUO Yes. No one wants to carry big books, and this one fit in your pocket. You could see people reading it on the vaporetto, carrying it all over the Biennale, in the cafes... People carried it with them.

LH **Everywhere. I remember.**

HUO It is a kind of infiltration. It is very Félix González-Torres.

LH **Let me go deeper. How do you think the action was perceived by the artistic community?**

HUO People are used that I do these kinds of things. I always believed in doing, since my *Kitchen Show*, which is related to dissemination and where we did a publication; people already knew my *Point d'ironie*, of which we distributed a hundred thousand copies two years earlier at the Biennale. We did it with agnès b. as a free newspaper. I don't think people were necessarily surprised. It's a nice thing to have and I do not think many people threw it away.

LH **No, of course not. You can still buy it in Amazon. Taking into account the wide range of responses, do you think all argumentative lines were duly represented? I mean, was it what you expected in that?**

HUO It was an open call. We invited all these artists without knowing what they would answer and we got unexpected responses. I think it is very diverse. Some artists did conceptual artwork, some artists did a piece of literature, and other artists did a visual artwork. It all fitted into a page. I have always been interested in artists' writings. I think it has also to do with the fact that artists' writings are very underrated in art. I have always thought that the fountain pen is, in a way, the brother or sister of the brush. Artist writers from Klee to Kandinsky, to Gerhard Richter and Maria Lassnig, whose writing I've edited, are very important. However, they

have not been published much. This is why I started to make books of artists' writing, which is related to *Sogni/Dreams*, as artists contribute by way of writing.

LH **Right. You were one of the first ones to use social networks, especially Instagram. Let me ask you: Is there any relationship between the project you carried out in Venice and the requests you make to artists for Instagram which you then upload regularly?**

HUO Of course! It is directly related. If you think about *Do It, Take Me (I'm Yours)*, a book for HangarBicocca, *Point d'ironie*, *Sogni/Dreams*, they are all projects which have to do with finding other ways of dissemination beyond the museum or physical space, where the exhibition comes to the viewer –the viewer does not have to come to the exhibition. It comes to you, it is sent to you.

I've been interested in that. According to Félix González-Torres we need to infiltrate and find other ways. The same goes for Boltanski and Boetti. Alighiero Boetti was a very important influence. He said that we need to find ways for the artworks to go into other channels, like a virus, either way. This is also what Félix said. With Boltanski and Lavier we would do it as an instruction show, which is still ongoing. It has been in a hundred and fifty cities. The same for Boltanski with *Don't Take Me (I'm Yours)*. Everybody can take away the artwork -basically the viewer comes away with a part of the exhibition for their living room or their kitchen. This has to do with my original show in my *Kitchen Show*. I wanted viewers to be able to do their own kitchen show.

That show happened because of my first show at the Serpentine in 1995. It went to Dortmund and we then we activated it last year for La Monnaie. From there it went to Denmark, to the Jewish Museum. It is now going to HangarBicocca, to Buenos Aires... These shows have a long life and they evolve, because it's a rule of the game, in a way.

Then you also have *Point d'ironie* with agnès b, which they reprint a couple of times a year, a hundred thousand copies of a free magazine that is given away. I would say, in a way, *Sogni/Dreams* falls into this category.

I did Nanomuseum in dialogue with Yoko Ono and others. I had a little frame, two by three inches, and I would give artists the space to exhibit in this little frame. Then I would carry the frame wherever I went. Then smartphones arrived. At that point I thought it is actually nothing else than a Nanomuseum, with the difference that I no longer have to carry my frame and show it to one or the other. Now I can just post it, and then it's on everybody's phone.

For a long time I thought about what I was going to do with social media. I don't want to pose for any selfies or post any of my travels. It has to be something more urgent, which has a necessity. Then, suddenly, I thought I would just ask artists to do images for it. Given that there are so many images out there, it has to be a specific sense and a necessity, a political necessity. In many conversations with Umberto Eco we figured out that handwriting needed to be preserved. It suddenly struck me. Previously I would have made a book by asking a hundred artists to handwrite me something. After that, I would do a book. I thought I could still do the book.

A book is not obsolete, but I just think it is nice that I can now post these every day. It is more or less my Nanomuseum with the iPhone. It has become a portable museum. I might come up with something else. It is amusing when I meet artists every day, at least two or three artists or architects. It's very organic, so these will be the posting of that day. At the same time, I think it is also interesting that, when it becomes repetitive, I then came up with the idea of the exquisite corpse. When I am with two or three artists, I fold the paper and we do the old...

This leads back to Breton and the dream, because Breton and the surrealists played exquisite corpse. They would always divide the paper into three parts and start again. We

started to reactivate this old surrealist tradition of the exquisite corpse. Now we have got sixty-five exquisite corpses and it's almost like an Instagram within my Instagram.

Hans Ulrich talks about his project on Instagram with enthusiasm. He picks up his mobile phone and shows me some images of artists' works that he posts. The next day I will see a message on his Instagram account that he himself has posted. The post is related to sleep and is by Jacques Herzog, "Over time you only work well if you sleep well". Some days after, another post on dreams by Rirkrit Tiravanija, "Do we dream".

LH Perfect, good.

HUO So that's it.

LH That's it. Your thoughts are very interesting and inspiring, so thank you for your time. Thank you for your engagement.

over time you only
work well if
you sleep well

Jacques Herzog