

In Conversation with Hakim Bey

Hans Ulrich Obrist

December 2010

Hans Ulrich Obrist: To begin at the beginning, how did you start writing?

Hakim Bey: I always wanted to be a writer, an artist, or possibly a cartoonist. Or a pirate. Those were my ambitions. But I didn't have enough talent for cartooning. And I've discovered that art is very hard to do when you're not sitting in one place. I don't know if everybody finds this to be true. But when I took up a life of travel in the 1960s, I gave up art because writing is so much easier to do when you're traveling. But I always felt equally called to all of these things. It's a question of fate. Fate made me a writer more than anything else.

HUO: And how did you begin traveling?

HB: Well, when I was a child I was of course fascinated by adventure stories, figures like Richard Halliburton and other world travelers who wrote books for children, and *National Geographic* magazine—I inherited a whole closet full of *National Geographic* issues going back to 1911 from a friend. And then when I grew up, I became interested in Eastern Mysticism, the way everybody began to be in the 1960s. I specifically wondered whether Sufism was still a living reality or whether it was just something in books. There was no way of telling at that time. There were no Sufis practicing in America, or at least none that we could discover. I was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, and then we had May '68, and that revolution failed. It clearly wasn't going to happen. So I decided to make my trip to the East and discover whether Sufism was a living reality or not. And, of course, it turned out that it was. And so were a lot of other things that I hadn't even anticipated, like tantric Hinduism, which I also became fascinated by while I was in India. So that all lasted from 1968 to 1980 or '81, when I went to Southeast Asia. I also went to Indonesia for a short, but very influential, trip. And after 1970 I lived in Iran, where I wrote criticism for the Shiraz Festival of the Arts. That's how I got to meet Peter Brook and Robert Wilson and all the people that I later worked with or was influenced by. I also met an Indonesian artist named Sardono Kusumo, who I later found again in Jakarta when I was traveling in Southeast Asia. He gave me the names and addresses of all these uncles everywhere in Java who were all involved in dance, puppetry, or mysticism; a fantastic family. So I traveled around Java from uncle to uncle, and performance to performance. And they have a special kind of mysticism there called Kebatinan, which is kind of like Sufism but not quite. It's different, and it would take a long time to explain why.

HUO: In 1974 and '75 you were part of the Shiraz Festival of the Arts, and you were also Director of the English Language Publication at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy in Tehran, where you published books by Henry Corbin, S. H. Nasr, etc.

HB: Well, it's weird. When I was living in Iran, I was studying Sufism, and I needed a job. So I started working for the Shiraz Festival of Arts and freelanced for local newspapers. Everybody needed something written in English in those days. Pay was very good. And eventually this idea of forming an academy came up. But it involved taking money—not necessarily from the government, but from the Empress, the Shahbanu, the wife of the Shah. She was the patron of this organization. And as it turns out, she was—I should say *is*, as she's still with us—a very intelligent and sensitive woman, quite aware of the ironies of her position. Basically her husband had told her that she could take care of charity and the arts. So she said, "Well, by God, I'll do it," and she did. And she was quite an activist. I have a lot of admiration for her, even though, as you know, the regime itself deserves no admiration at all. Incidentally, his family hated her, but let's not go into that. In any case, she was the patron, and she set up this academy, and it was all very idealistic. People could come and study without taking a degree, or if their home institution wanted to give them credit that was fine too. We would sign their letters and so forth. But basically it was meant to be a pure research and teaching institution, not degree-granting, much more along the lines of traditional Iranian education in the madrasa, that style. She gave us a beautiful building in downtown Tehran, and we had it fixed up. It was quite beautiful and quite comfortable. And we had a budget to buy a library and a budget to publish and so forth and so on. It was all, you might say, at the expense of a very unpleasant political reality that I was kind of naïve about at the time. But I think what we ended up doing was fairly valuable and interesting. I mean, just the support that we gave to people like Henry Corbin was fairly important for world thinking, I believe. And even though we were in a kind of far away place, people came to visit us. When we invited somebody, they would become extremely curious. Even Ivan Illich, who certainly was no monarchist—quite the opposite! But when I got to know him I asked, "How come you accepted our invitation? How come you accepted this invitation from the Empress of Iran? It's not like you." And his answer was: "I was just too curious!"

HUO: At the moment I'm editing a monograph on Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, the pioneering Iranian artist, and she has been telling me something similar, that in the visual arts there was this moment in Iran—Andy Warhol went there...

HB: Money certainly had something to do with it. I mean, the Shiraz Festival of Arts offered so much money that every good left-wing artist in the world couldn't say no, with a few noble exceptions, I would say. There were some who didn't come. The Living Theatre never came. John Cage, sure, he came. So did Merce Cunningham, Karlheinz Stockhausen, the list goes on. Everybody came because there was incredible money. They would tell Stockhausen, "Come and put on every piece of music you ever wrote, in a beautiful town in the desert of Iran with minarets and domes and camels in the courtyard." And how can anyone resist this!

HUO: And after all this traveling, you moved to the Hudson Valley ten years ago. You mentioned that you're making a local history of this place. Can you tell me about the area and how you chose it?

HB: It's the big backyard of New York City. It's always been very pleasant up here, a mixture of farmers and millionaires from the city, or artists. It's the Hudson River—which is a beautiful river—and all the rivers that flow into it. It's an amazing water system, the Catskill Mountains, one of the most beautiful spots in America, etc., etc. I spent a lot of time up here in the 1960s with

Timothy Leary, who had his estate in Millbrook, just across the river from where I am now. And I of course took a lot of LSD there, and you might say that I imprinted on the Hudson Valley as one of the most magical and beautiful spots in the world, as this place where I wanted to eventually live. And it just happens to be an hour away from New York City, where I always lived. But I had no idea what a rich and bizarre history this region had. I'm finding all kinds of things. Just to give you an example, the second artwork in this series I'm working on was devoted to a woman called the "Publick Universal Friend" who died in 1776 and came back to life—just popped up in her coffin and announced that she was the female Messiah. And she had followers around here in a village called Pang Yang. She lived very far away, close to the Finger Lakes up in the Frontier Region, and she used to communicate with her followers here through telepathic dreaming—by appearing in their dreams. After she died, her community of followers here became very, very strange—inbred, leading extremely primitive lives, hunting and fishing and not working, getting into trouble with the police, that kind of group. And her ghost would still appear in the graveyard of this village. The people of Pang Yang are well-known locally, but nobody outside of this little region has ever heard of them. By the 1970s the village was completely abandoned, and so I did a piece there in honor of this woman, who was called the Lady in Gray.

HUO: Can you tell me more about her?

HB: Her ghost was still seen in the 1970s, and a few of her followers were still around then. Their descendants still live here, but they no longer live like they used to. They're just normal people. But to honor the strangeness of their lives and the mysticism of their leader, and her courage as a pioneer of, I don't know, women's liberation and communism, which she practiced, I did this piece in the Pang Yang graveyard, which is not marked. It took me months to find it. It's on private land, but nobody seems to know who owns it. I just went back in there with a few friends and left a huge pile of white flowers in the graveyard, about \$200 worth of flowers that I bought, and that was the piece basically.

HUO: Could you speak a bit about your work as an artist? As you know, we're working on this book and about maps for the twenty-first century and mapmaking. We've received your wonderful page for the book, and I'm very curious to know more about these maps you've done.

HB: Well, I have to say that I had so much fun doing that for you that I decided to go back to art. There's nothing more satisfying than working with your hands. So basically I devised this idea to do what I call vanishing art, which means that the art comes into existence in the very moment that it disappears. For example, the first piece I did involved throwing gold rings into a river—like the ancient druids used to do. Each of these works is based on a place in the region where I live, and each one is based on a historical event or person that I find inspiring, either because they were mystical or revolutionary, or for some other reason. In each case I find a way to do an artwork that vanishes, either immediately or over the course of a few days. I have plenty of plans for other ways of doing this, but so far I've been throwing things into water and burying things. In the future I'll be burning a lot of things as well. I want to get into pyrotechnics.

And then in each case, I make a map similar to the one that you have, using collage, which is meant to be a sort of magical manipulation of the toposphere, of the map world, the image of the place. I use photographs and found objects and so forth to make these, and I also keep a box of documentation for each one, with photographs, drafts, essays, poems, souvenirs, and so forth. So even though the art disappears, the map and the box remain behind as a record of the work.

The one that I sent you originated as a nineteenth century Hudson River navigation chart. The important place there is Esopus Island, which is where Aleister Crowley camped out in 1918. I

visited it with William Breeze, who is the official representative of Aleister Crowley's occult and literary remains. He's the literary executor, and he's also the head of the Ordo Templi Orientis, which is the occult lodge that Crowley left behind. So Bill Breeze and I hired a sailboat for the day and went to that island and explored it. We had a nice time, came back, had a nice dinner, and that was pretty much the start of this whole series of works. I realized that I've been living up here and studying the local history for ten years, and I don't know what to do with all this material about this place where I live. I didn't want to turn it into some stupid guidebook for tourists. I didn't want to turn it into a stupid academic book for an academic press. So for now I'm putting all this historical and topological knowledge into these works I make in a very private way, just for friends. Maybe sometime I will have an exhibition of the maps. But I would like to wait a year or so, until I've really got a good, solid collection before doing something like a gallery show. So next year, God willing, I'm going to do another seven or eight of these works, and that might be enough to start thinking about doing a show. But in the meantime I sort of like the idea that it's private and secret, driven by word of mouth and magical influences rather than publication or publicity.

HUO: So if you were to look back at your work over these many decades, what would you say were the moments of epiphany?

HB: There are big epiphanies and small epiphanies. I could mention the time I was crossing Hammersmith Bridge in London late at night on my way back from a friend's dinner party and I had a vision of the lost Imam of Shi'ism hovering in the air over the bridge in the rain. The vision told me to end my association with orthodox Islam and become a heretic, which I then did. And I've been a heretic ever since. That would be a moment of epiphany. But this doesn't necessarily relate so much to my writing and art as it does to the totality of my inner world, if you know what I mean.

HUO: Sure, and it's interesting because it also leads us to the question of religion.

HB: Well, I always say that we have to be careful about our terms here. If we're defining religion as institutional religion—with all the problems that come with institutions going tenfold for religion—then we have to be very, very careful to be clear about what we're talking about. If we're talking about spirituality, as we like to say in our hippie way, then we're having another conversation, one that isn't necessarily about religion. Or maybe we're having another conversation altogether. As an anarchist, I've always been a spiritual anarchist, and naturally this annoys my more left-wing type anarchist friends who are all, of course, good atheists. But, it's an old tradition, after all. Maybe the oldest. If you look at the tribal societies that people like Pierre Clastres or Marshall Sahlins visited and wrote about, you find people who live without authority, but you never, ever find that they don't have spirituality. They always have a spiritual view of things. Take shamanism, which is a broad and hard-to-define term, but it is not religion, because it has no dogma. It doesn't have priests. It doesn't have temples. It doesn't have taxes that you have to pay. It doesn't make rules about sexuality, or maybe it does, but not the same kind that a religion makes. And in any case, those rules would only apply to the shaman and not to anybody else in the tribe. So, that's to say that there's a big difference between free spirituality on the one hand and its betrayal in organized religion on the other hand. Having said that, we can begin to discuss ways in which even organized religion can be interesting. I often say that what I really am is a historian of religion or religions. And that's what unites all my work and has for many, many years. It's a subject that I take very, very seriously indeed, but without subscribing to any orthodoxy.

HUO: Who are your heroes? Who do you feel to have inspired you?

HB: Well, I'd like to think of my heroes now as the people I'm doing these artworks about, the people I'm dedicating them to. For example, another one was a member of the local Indian tribe who was called Big Indian because he was seven-and-a-half feet tall. Now it was actually fairly common for Native Americans to have these giants among them, there are many examples known to archaeologists, and this was the real thing. There's a town nearby that was named after him, because supposedly a Dutch settler murdered him there for running away with his wife. But when I looked into this story, which is already fantastic, I found it was even more peculiar and interesting because it was known that Big Indian—whose real name was Winnisook, which means “snow falling reflected in his eyes” in Algonquin—was actually gay. He was queer, and his real companion was not a white woman but another Indian man, who was short, older than him, and was probably what they call a berdache, a cross-dressing shaman. That's speculation. But the relationship itself was not speculation, and is acknowledged not only in history, but also in oral tradition amongst what remains of the native population around here, which is not much. So I did a piece to commemorate him up in the mountains, in the beautiful forests full of hemlock where there are four waterfalls called Otter Falls. This is where I started thinking about this idea of queering the landscape, that there's something queer about the whole modern love of nature, and that that could be a very good thing. This is the thesis I'm working on. Critics would say that my relationship to nature is reflected through layers of literature and art and class relationships and so forth, and this is true. Yet there is something strange and queer about falling in love with nature in the modern world, and it seems that the landscape itself is in need of a queering of some kind. That's also why I did the piece for Oscar Wilde, though it's not a matter of mere homosexuality. That actually has nothing to do with it. It's a matter of accepting that the unnatural is also the natural, as Goethe said. And if it's unnatural for us to be involved with nature, if there is no first nature, but only second nature, or even third nature, it's not a problem—rather, we should rejoice in this queerness. So in this sense, Big Indian became a great hero for me. And actually there's a 10-foot high statue of him in the local park in this little town. I have a picture of myself next to this statue.

HUO: It sounds like these mapping projects have a lot to do with memory. The historian Eric Hobsbawm always speaks about a protest against forgetting, and Rem Koolhaas suggested to me recently that amnesia might be at the very core of the digital revolution. It seems that with more and more information, there might be less and less memory. Would you agree? Has it become urgent now to protest against forgetting?

HB: I think so. I mean, I probably have a much more dire view of cyberspace and the internet than Rem Koolhaas. I think of it as a black hole of memory, and I think memory is disappearing at an alarming rate, thanks to this idea that everyone now has a prosthetic memory. The idea is that this prosthetic memory means that no one needs to remember anything anymore. You just push a button and get any information you want. Well, you first of all need to know what questions to ask. If you don't even know what you want to know, how can you know it? That's what I mean about the black hole—it sucks in knowledge. It's actually worse than forgetting—it works against memory itself.

HUO: It's like an antimatter of memory. But was there any moment when you believed that the internet would provide possibilities for new forms of freedom? Did you always have this position that the internet is a black hole?

HB: Well, I have to admit that, like everybody else in the 1980s, I was much more optimistic about these things. And in some of my writing I may have given the impression that I would become some sort of cyber libertarian. I have many friends in that camp, but then as time went on, I became more of a Luddite. I believe that technology should not consist of an attack on the social. And if you think about the symptom that everybody talks about, the loss of privacy, or even the redefinition of what privacy could possibly be, well, I see this as an actual attack on society. And it's interesting that it comes at the same time as Thatcher saying that there is no such thing as society. It's an ideological move against the social. And it's not for the glorification of the individual, either. To me, the individual also loses in this formula. But it's primarily meant to break society down into individual consumer entities, because that's what money wants. Capital itself wants everyone to have everything. It doesn't want you to share your car with anyone, it wants each person to have their own. And by the way, the US has achieved this—we now have one car for every adult in the country. Capital wants everybody to have to own everything, and to share nothing. And the social result of this is ghastly. It's scary, frightening. For me it's apocalyptic.

HUO: Do you also see it as anti-democratic?

HB: As an anarchist, I've never been a fetishist for democracy per se. I think democracy, to be interesting for an anarchist, has to be direct democracy. Representative forms of democracy share the same problem with all the other forms of the state. But yes, in a broad, general sense, I do think technology is becoming anti-democratic.

HUO: Antonio Negri has recently described the ongoing obliteration of the notion of exteriority, which seems interesting in relation to this.

HB: You have to admit that it's happening, that space becomes more meaningless as it accelerates. This is Paul Virilio's position, that speed takes away the meaning of place, and I have to agree. It's very simple. If you go from point A to point B on a plane, you don't see anything, there's no space, nothing. There is no cultural existence. How can you have organic travel, if I can put it that way, at a speed quicker than that of the camel? I'm not sure it's possible. Maybe there was a weird situation in the 1960s and '70s in which part of the world still ran at the speed of camels. And if you could get to those parts of the world and experience it, then you could experience that kind of time. I'm not sure it still exists, though I hope it does. I think it's very important, just as it's important to have rainforests and things like that. There should be parts of the world where other kinds of time can be experienced.

HUO: Perhaps it has to do with embodiment, with very physical experiences. Negri also spoke about migrating through cities to do nomad seminars, and I'd be very curious to know about how this embodiment is possible in the context of traveling. For example, I recently read an interview with you in which you said

living in the body, being aware of the positivity of the material bodily principle (to quote Bakhtin) is in fact a form of resistance, a martial art, if you will. In a world where the body is so degraded, so de-emphasized on the one hand by the empire of the image and on the other hand where the body is degraded by a kind of obsessive narcissism, athletics, fashion, and health, that somewhere in between these extremes to me is the ordinary body which, as the Zen masters would say, is the Zen body.

Can you explain that to me?

HB: Well, you have to experience time and space in the body. And if we're no longer in the body—that is, if the body is de-emphasized to a point at which people no longer experience time and space firsthand—how could there be such a thing as real travel? We can also look at it in another way. In the Stone Age, say, everybody in the tribe had to know how to do pretty much anything. You have to know how to fix your own shoes. You have to know how to herd sheep. You have to know how to sing songs, because if you can't sing, you're nobody. You have to know how to have visions, because if you don't have visions, you're just a boring, stupid person. You have to be able to make pots. You have to be able to plant corn. You have to be able to be a warrior. You have to do all these things yourself. Your hands and your body must know many, many things. Modern technology mediates between you and all of those things, so you don't have to know how to do them anymore. Some mechanical prosthesis will do all those things for you while you carry out some incredibly boring, repetitive task on behalf of capitalism, so that you can make a measly living while some other bastard becomes rich. And that's pretty much how the modern world relates to the real technology, which would be art—or what is now called craft, a term I despise. Craft in the modern world means pots and pans that are too expensive to actually cook beans in. The whole idea that the things you use in your daily life could be beautiful and embodied and made by bodies to be beautiful, that's so rare. And generally only rich people are able to have that experience, which is not fair.

HUO: I also wanted to ask you about the origins of *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, which is a book that changed the way I approached exhibitions when I began working as a curator.

Growing up with this idea that the exhibition has a master plan and the curator is the one who does a checklist, reading *T.A.Z.* for the first time in the early '90s really triggered a whole set of exhibitions for us, like *Life/Live*, *Cities on the Move*, and *Laboratorium*. Most of my exhibitions in the '90s, and then also *Utopia Station* in the 2000s, relinquished the curatorial master plan in favor of being temporary autonomous zones in which we would basically invite collectives and artists to curate shows within the show. So for me it was a toolbox for curating, and I always wondered how you came to write that book, how its genesis came about?

HB: Well, the real genesis was my connection to the communal movement in America, my experiences in the 1960s in places like Timothy Leary's commune in Millbrook. And of course the main criticism of this activity is that it didn't last. But these things tend to be very ephemeral—if a secular commune lasts in America for ten years, it's a miracle. Usually only the religious ones last longer than a generation—and usually at the expense of becoming quite authoritarian, and probably dismal and boring as well. I've noticed that the exciting ones tend to disappear, and as I began to further study this phenomenon, I found that they tend to disappear in a year or a year and a half. In the '60s we had a lot of communes that lasted for a year and half, two, three years. I think the only one that survived was *The Farm*, and that's due to a number of things that made it very different, such as the fact that it had what I would say was a rather authoritarian leader, Steve Gaskin. What a brilliant guy. I think the place held together because he was willing to be its leader. A lot of the other communes fell apart because they were so anarchistic that they had no leaders, and so nobody washed the dishes. The movement was still going on in the 1980s. I had friends who were deeply involved in intentional communities, and I myself got involved. And everybody in the '80s was giving a good deal of thought to the whole idea of what intentional community could mean and how it could improve your life to be in one, or if it even could at all. That was the question. I think it unquestionably does. People have great fun for at least a year

or a year and a half, and then when the problems start, that's usually when it breaks up. After thinking about that for a while, it occurred to me that, well, it's not such a great tragedy that these things don't last. You shouldn't condemn the experience of the people at Brook Farm, for example, just because it only lasted a few years. Those people had an incredibly deep experience that changed their lives. They had fun while they were there. They had a more intense existence, with everything geared up to a higher charge. All you have to do is read a little Emerson and a little Thoreau, see what the people who visited Brook Farm had to say about it. It was buzzing with energy and good vibrations.

HB: Exactly. So it occurred to me that you could make a virtue of the temporary nature of these things. If these organizations fall apart after eighteen months or so, well, let's just plan on it. Let's have these communities and say that they're only going to last for a short while. And as soon as the intensity fades, then it's over. It's finished. We wrap it up, go somewhere else, do something new. But I also have to admit that by the 1980s, waiting for the revolution for thirty years had gotten a little tiresome. When I was really young and full of enthusiasm in the 1960s, we really, actually, sincerely believed that a major transformation was imminent. And as it turned out, we were all naïve, perhaps like those Christian fundamentalists who are so certain that the end of the world is imminent. I don't know. It could have been a form of millenarian insanity, but we believed in it in any case. The older we got, the more this receded into history, at least for me. And for others it became a futile, youthful dream they had to give up. But I'm still working for that transformation, though I'm no longer convinced it's around the corner, or that it's going to happen in my lifetime. So as I began wondering how we could have a taste of revolutionary life without the revolution, since it was apparently not going to happen, this new Temporary Autonomous Zone seemed the only possible answer to that. There was no single moment of genesis really, but a whole series of light-saturated moments throughout American history—including the 1960s, which I had lived through myself—that all culminated in that theoretical work.

HUO: So if one considers Temporary Autonomous Zones as these pockets of anarchy, do you find any now, in the twenty-first century? Where are they? Can they be expanded? And what forms do they take?

HB: Well, I've always said that I didn't invent the TAZ. I just noticed that it existed. It's always existed. For some reason, most people have to believe that what they're doing is going to last forever in order to find the enthusiasm to do anything at all. The only thing that changed was thinking of the temporary itself as a possible good, instead of an obstacle. A good dinner party is a Temporary Autonomous Zone. Nobody tells you what to do at a good dinner party. Nobody gives orders. Nobody collects taxes. It's an experience of giving and being given to, of filling the body and emptying the mind, having good conversation and good wine and so forth. This is already a TAZ, but you have to conceptualize it that way for it to be that way. It's simply a matter of consciousness. But once you find that consciousness, the forms of organization begin to open up. You begin to see all the different forms of organization that this could take. It could be anything from a picnic by the riverside to a community that lasts for two years. Where is it actually happening? Well, I have to say that the current moment at the end of this decade is, to me, one of the low energy points of history. Maybe I'm just getting old, but I feel that it's actually hard to find a good TAZ now. And it's more important than ever to do so. One reason being that communism is no longer. We now live in the world of the triumph of capital. And in this world, it would seem that the TAZ is, perhaps, the last possible revolutionary form. I hope that's not

true, but it may be. Either way, the idea is certainly more important now than it was around 1989 when I dreamed the idea up in the first place.

HUO: The medium of the exhibition, has a limited lifespan. An exhibition usually lasts a month or two, and if the show travels it lasts a year or two. So it actually falls in that limited lifespan between a day and eighteen months. Can you talk about this idea? Do you think exhibitions can be Temporary Autonomous Zones? Have you seen exhibitions that you've felt were Temporary Autonomous Zones?

HB: Yes, there was a group in the 1960s called USCO. They seem to have disappeared without trace, but they did exhibitions in which they would move into a museum and change it into a playful participatory space. They came and did something at the Riverside Museum, which isn't there anymore, on the Upper West Side in New York. USCO transformed this space, and they kept it transformed for a couple of months. This was in the early hippie days, probably 1964 or '65. And all the hippies in the neighborhood would go and hang out at this exhibition every day because it was such a comfortable, welcoming, and charming space. That's also where I first came across the idea of an art exhibition as a community space. It had a big influence on my thinking.

HUO: I'm very curious to know your ideas on cultural institutions. Like an exhibition, we can also say that an institution has a limited lifespan. Can an institution also be a Temporary Autonomous Zone? I'm very curious as to whether you would build an institution, and if so, what kind?

HB: It's a very interesting question. People ask me all the time whether there can somehow be a permanent autonomous zone. Well, sure, in theory there could be. But if you've studied the sociology of institutions, you know that there's—how should we put it—a wavelike energy pattern that moves through an institution over time. It starts low because, let's say, the institution begins without money and with only a few people. And then, if it sets out to do anything at all, it quickly reaches a peak of energy, a peak of enthusiasm. It can flow on that for a number of years, but not forever. The original people get old, they get tired of what they're doing, they start to worry about health insurance, their marriages go bad, whatever, but the energy level starts to go down and the level of institutionalization begins to go up. Ivan Illich is a big hero of mine, and I think his sociology of institutions is absolutely correct. At a certain point, the institution starts trying to monopolize the field that it entered, and begins to have the opposite effect of its original intentions. So even public schooling becomes a monopoly, and suddenly it's no longer educating you, but making you stupid, right? So that's Illich's idea about institutions, and in my experience this is how things have worked out every time, every single time without exception. I mean, it's amazing that the Catholic Church has lasted for two thousand years. How do they do it? Well, clearly not by being good anarchists. But anyway, most institutions would never be able to last that long, even the ones founded with eternity in mind won't last that long. The ones that have, I think, are exclusively religious ones. So if you're going to start an institution and think of it as an autonomous zone, you can do one of two things. You can say, "As soon as this starts to become boring for us, we're going to quit, just quit." Or you can say, like Trotsky, that there has to be a permanent revolution inside the institution—you have to be always stirring it up from inside. And as soon as that process stops, then the sclerosis, the stiffening of the arteries sets in, and before you know it you have an Illich scenario of paradoxical counter-productivity, as he rather clumsily termed it.

HUO: That's exactly why Cedric Price always said he wanted to do the Fun Palace, which was the institution he imagined. It uses a completely flexible sort of shipyard technology with

hanging and suspended, ever-changing functions. And from the outset its lifespan was meant to be limited to five years.

HB: I think it's an excellent idea. Of course, it sounds absolutely ghastly to anyone who has to think about the budget. If you're talking to your accountant about this, better not mention your plans to stop after five years, because it's going to be a nightmare to raise and administer the money. That's mostly why it doesn't happen, because capital doesn't work that way. Maybe you could have these kinds of institutions in some kind of ideal, democratic, socialist situation. If we looked at Holland or Denmark in the 1970s with the paradise of social democracy—it's sort of ironic, but that's about as close as humanity ever got.

HUO: Or Sweden in the 1960s when Pontus Hultén was head of Moderna Museet. Around '68, '69, and '70, basically everything happened at the Moderna Museet, to the point where if there was nothing happening late at night, the guards would begin to wonder whether something had gone wrong. It wasn't the other way around.

HB: We can find examples in Scandinavia during that brief decade or two of social democracy. It would be hard to find other examples—I certainly don't think we're going to find any in modern capitalist America or England. But now, you have an advantage. You can tell people you're a curator and that what you're doing is an art exhibition. And then they understand it in a certain way, say, as a temporary project. But if you told people that you're founding an institution, then their reactions are going to be very different, right?

HUO: Exactly, and the other question is whether the establishment of institutions runs counter to the notions of autonomy—even if they're your own institutions.

HB: That's right. So you can use this notion of a permanent revolution—I mean, I did work for many years at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University in Boulder Colorado. It was founded by Allen Ginsberg and Chogyam Trungpa. At a certain point, it looked to me like they were headed for that moment when the institution begins to change, to stiffen up. And I told them that that was the moment they should have a revolution—get rid of all these buildings, fire all the bureaucrats, split off from the other departments, go up into the mountains, live in tents, do something weird. But of course they couldn't do it. They were already getting old enough to worry about their health insurance and retirement pensions. And when that kind of thinking starts, forget it. It's over.

HUO: How do you see the future? Do you think civilization will survive the next century?

HB: I don't have a very good record with the crystal ball, and I don't know what to predict exactly. Obviously one of the worst predictions you can make is that things continue as they are, only becoming more and more intensified, like a J. G. Ballard-type future where the whole universe is one big shopping mall. That would be the worst. Any catastrophe might be a relief compared to that. But on the other hand, catastrophes are bad for you and me, and we don't want to get caught in one. It might be good for history, but would be awful for individuals, especially artists, who never had that much going for them in the first place. I'm not one of these people waiting for the big ecological catastrophe. I don't want to see it happen. I'm still hopeful. And in the end, what else can you do? You have to have, as Ernst Bloch said, revolutionary hope.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Hans Ulrich Obrist
In Conversation with Hakim Bey
December 2010

Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from www.e-flux.com
From e-flux Journal #21.

theanarchistlibrary.org