

**Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Lewis Hyde**  
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Hans Ulrich Obrist (HUO)  
Lewis Hyde (LH)

**HUO:** I'm very happy to reach you; your books have been a great inspiration for me for a long time. I was wondering whether you have ever connected to visual artists about that?

**LH:** Well, there are several visual artists I've become close to, partly through my work. Bill Viola and Ann Hamilton come to mind.

**HUO:** Have you yourself been inspired by visual artists in your writing?

**LH:** The one book you didn't mention is called *Trickster Makes This World* and one thing I did in that book was to spend a lot of time thinking about Duchamp, who, of course, has a touch of the trickster about him. I guess I turn to visual artists as a way of stopping writing, so the visual arts mean a lot to me and there are people whose work I follow and respond to.

**HUO:** Have you written on visual artists in the past?

**LH:** I've written several things, most of which are on my website ([lewishyde.com](http://lewishyde.com)). I was invited to a place in the United States called Penland which is a craft school in the South and I wrote a long piece about Penland and the visual arts.

I've written about a New Zealand–American painter named Max Gimblett. I also did a catalogue essay for a show that was at the Benaki Museum in Athens. It was a show about shadow puppetry and shadow arts, and I wrote a piece about Karagiosis who is the hero of the Greek Shadow Puppet Theatre.

So, if I'm assigned to do something and I want to do it, I've occasionally written about the visual arts.

**HUO:** That's interesting, because we're doing a show with the French artist Christian Boltanski, who is also working a lot on shadows. We basically came up with an idea about twenty years ago to do an exhibition where everything would be a takeaway. It's called *Take Me, I'm Yours*, and includes for example a work by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, where there are stacks of candies or posters that people can actually take away for free, so that the work disappears. At the same time, there are also huge piles of cloth which form a big installation that Boltanski did. These remind one of death, but also visitors can take a piece away, and little by little, it disappears

Hans-Peter Feldmann created a room full of hundreds of thousands of images that visitors can gradually take away until the room is empty, and do their own exhibition at home. We will send you information on that exhibition because this show was very inspired by your books, also. We also invited for the edition at Monnaie de Paris Etel Adnan, a Lebanese-American poet, who created 75 different poems and drawings cards that are diffused along her poetry readings and meetings throughout the exhibition.

**LH:** Gonzalez-Torres, I think, if he didn't know my work, comes from the same background. I love his work. I should tell you one thing that I'm working on. I'm currently writing a book in favour of forgetfulness; I'm trying to think of places where forgetting is more useful than memory. This has many different layers, some of them are mythological, some of them are political, but of course, there is a theme in artistic practice about self-forgetfulness.

There's a wonderful line in Duchamp, who said that he loved Picabia's work because Picabia had the talent to forget what he'd done last and therefore make paintings that were new. One thing I'm doing in my book on forgetting is to have an imaginary museum of forgetfulness: I'm writing the signage and wall texts that would go with different imagined pieces in such a museum.

**HUO:** We worked very closely with the late Eric Hobsbawm, the English historian, on a marathon event called the Memory Marathon. Eric Hobsbawm spoke about the necessity of

bringing history into wider media, about “protesting against forgetting” and “the right to forget”.

**LH:** The right to be forgotten, in a way, goes back centuries, because any time you begin to have a new medium which can record, you have the problem of the durability of things which used to be ephemeral. So there always arises an argument in favour of forgetfulness, or in favour of the kind of memory which is imaginative, in the sense that it both remembers and forgets, depending on what its goals are.

**HUO:** We did the exhibition I just mentioned, *Take Me I'm Yours*, twenty years ago at the Serpentine Gallery in London, and now it's having a revival in Paris, in an institution called La Monnaie, which is a new kind of Kunsthalle. Obviously, it's a very different time now than when we did that show. How do you feel the necessity of that topic now differs from when you first wrote *The Gift*?

**LH:** [laughs] Well, in some sense, I don't think the ground has changed that much, but certainly one thing I think is different now than when I wrote it is that the digital Internet has shown people things which were kind of unimaginable before, particularly the kind of online commons creativity. Wikipedia is a simple, great example of people who contribute time intelligence to make something which no earlier market or industrial form of production could have imagined.

So, in a sense, there's been a kind of proof with the Internet about generosity as a creative force. I don't know, maybe the art market is more of a market now but my own sense is that this comes in waves. That there are always times when the rich put their money in art and it becomes more commodified than other times.

Do you know, by the way, the artist Lee Mingwei?

**HUO:** Yes. I don't know him personally but I know the work.

**LH:** Yes, because Lee Mingwei is another one who has been influenced by *The Gift*. There was an illegal Chinese translation in Taiwan when he was young, and he read that version of it. His work constantly has in it an aesthetic of

generosity and ephemerality. He just did a piece at The Museum of Fine Arts here in Boston which was called *Sonic Blossom* and they got about a dozen opera singers from the Boston area in one of the big galleries, and patrons of the museum would be asked one at a time if they'd like to come and be sung to. It was really quite wonderful and moving. I mean, you would get one person sitting in a chair, and thirty feet away you would get the opera singer, who would sing a Schubert *Leider* directly to this one person, and you could also just stand in the room and hear. But it's typical of Lee Mingwei's work.

**HUO:** Well, that's fascinating. So he was inspired by your books?

**LH:** Yes.

**HUO:** The other day I spoke to Tim Berners-Lee who, of course, invented the World Wide Web in 1989 and set the basis for it—it was initially called ENQUIRE as he told us—and he's devastated by the commercialisation of the Internet, and of it no longer being, in this sense, a common resource, as it initially should have been.

I was wondering how you see the situation of the Internet right now and whether that evolves your research.

**LH:** Well, first of all, Tim Berners-Lee did the smart, simple thing of releasing the protocols so that they operate as common properties, not as owned things. I think, in the end, the Internet continues to operate on two different levels, and you know, first of all, it wouldn't work at all if it weren't still the case that the protocols for the Internet are un-owned, and are a common asset.

My book *Common As Air* is an attempt to explain why such cultural commons matter. I set out to write it in part because since the rise of the Internet we've seen a big fight going on, not just over commodification but about who gets to set up the rules such that you can commodify what is essentially a un-ownable thing. All the moves that the big content industries have made to try to structure the Internet such that it's easier to make money off of it, yeah, these are disappointments to people like Tim Berners-Lee and to myself.

But to my mind it's still a bird in flight, the ground has not settled and there are still fights going on around such simple things as net neutrality, which people are aware of and engaged in.

**HUO:** So, in this sense, you're not as pessimistic as he is.

**LH:** No, maybe I should be! [laughs] Maybe he's closer to it and can see the darker side more clearly than I do.

**HUO:** I observe an amazing new generation of poets born with the Internet.

**LH:** Yeah. Well, you're cheering me up if this is the case. It makes me think that, in a way, poetry, because it's outside the market, is the bohemia of the arts. It's a place where people can hang out and the economy is, by nature, different. It also then becomes a seedbed, a place where things can happen and imagination can roam in a way that is harder in a commodified world.

In this book I'm doing now on memory and forgetting, one of the great gravitational pulls that one feels these days is to bone up on the neuroscience, which I've decided not to do. Not that I'm not interested in it or don't read about it, but in fact I'm more interested in the poetics of memory and forgetting—you know, how normal humans beings imagine these faculties—and so my go-to texts are sometimes poetry but also things like Vladimir Nabokov's 'Speak, Memory' and actually, I'm deep into trying to understand what Proust was doing. This is the myth of poetics and memory, not the neuroscience of it.

**HUO:** So will it be a book involving lots of different case studies of authors who dealt with memory?

**LH:** I'm writing something that's episodic—lots of short pieces—and yes, some of them are about particular cases. For example, in my imaginary museum of forgetfulness, I have entries that have to do with Robert Smithson. Robert Smithson has an early essay called, 'Entropy in the New Monument'. He's thinking about Dan Flavin's first light installations, one of which references Vladimir Tatlin, a Russian monumental artist, and so Smithson says, 'instead

of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.' I have a short one-page explanation and commentary on what I think Smithson means by this.

So, the book has case studies in a sense but it's not... I'm tired of making arguments. I'm tired of mastering subjects, so I'm doing something that's much more on the fly, trying to find the places which are thought-provoking and present them as thought-provoking, such that readers of this book will find themselves spinning off and thinking what needs to be thought in their own situation.