

Ever. Ever. Ever.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, Anton Vidokle, and Julieta Aranda

The following is an email conversation, which took place between Hans Ulrich Obrist, Anton Vidokle, and Julieta Aranda in late July 2006.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: To begin at the beginning, rumors say that e-flux started in the Holiday Inn in Chinatown, a gathering in a hotel room?

Anton Vidokle: Yes, actually the rumors are correct: in November 1998, together with Regine Basha and Christoph Gerozissis, we organized a one night exhibition called *The Best Surprise Is No Surprise*, with Michel Auder, Carsten Nicolai, Tomoko Takahashi, and Peter Scott. It took place at the Holiday Inn on Center Street in Chinatown, from 10 in the evening till 10 in the morning the next day. We were all really broke at the time and had only enough money to rent a room for a night, and absolutely nothing to pay for invitations or even mail press releases. At the time, I had just opened my first email account and thought that

maybe we should try to email some press releases to our friends. The result was really a surprise – hundreds of people came to the hotel room throughout the night; even at 3 in the morning it was completely packed. Around 4am, Ernesto Neto showed up with a case of wine, the party continued.

I was very worried all night because I expected the hotel people to start asking questions, because so many people were coming up to the room; so we told them that we are doing auditions for a film and the director was a very eccentric person who was only in New York for one night. This worked, but in the morning some people from the hotel desk came anyway because they wanted to audition ...

A few days later I thought that this is something that could be structured into a service that galleries and museums could use, and a month or two later, together with another group of artists friends, Adriana Arenas, Josh Welber, and Terence Gower, we formed a company we called e-flux.

HUO: From Courbet who set up his own “artist run” space to show his work, to the proliferations of artist run spaces in the 1990s (Transmission, City Racing, etc.) there is a long history of artists setting up their own exhibitions. Do you see e-flux as an extension/continuation of this idea of the artist-run space?

AV: You know, the way things developed, e-flux is probably more complex and cannot be classified simply as an artist-run space.

Part of the problem is that while at a certain point artist-run spaces were very inventive, independent, and aimed to be some type of an alternative to existing cultural centers, museums, and other officially “mandated” institutions or commercial galleries, it seems that during the past decade much of this inventiveness simply stopped. Artists’ initiatives these days from the start mimic existing institutional and commercial structures: incorporate, establish a board of directors, sell memberships, produce benefit auctions and market editions, sell artworks, etc. To think that

this has no effect on their programming or the content they generate would be naïve. There is virtually no period of experimentation before this type of “normalized” behavior sets in. And this is really deeply troubling. Actually, I am now organizing a pretty extensive workshop, together with a curator from Istanbul, Pelin Tan, to try to discuss and analyze why this is happening, why there are so few new models emerging.

With me it was a rather different situation: we started without fully knowing what we were doing. In the beginning there was no desire to form any sort of an organization, or to raise funds or any such thing, but merely to do certain things that were personally interested in and to try to ignore the kind of stalemate we felt in New York at the time, to imagine that the city itself was a space for projects whether they were in the Holiday Inn, a public park, a forest outside the city, and lasted for a weekend, for a day, or even an hour, without funds or budget, without publicity or any structure whatsoever. One of our press releases from the time started by saying: “We have a day: May 17 1998 ... ” and this was really all we needed. e-flux

came out of all this as a kind of strange bonus: there was no business plan, no strategy, just the pure pleasure of improvization and mass communication, like running a small radio station or something. Surprisingly it turned profitable, and this enables it to stay fully independent of normal power structures that are just killing everything these days: the market, government funding organizations, collectors and sponsors. But the independence was there from the start; it was really independence of intent behind all these activities.

I would say that e-flux is not an artist-run space, it's probably closer to a long-term artists' project.

(Maybe here we can have Julieta's input as she had a big influence on how things developed ...)

Julieta Aranda: A few years ago, Anton and I used to share a studio on the fifth floor of a building with no elevator. We never really used the space, partly because the climb up was really terrible, and partly because the space itself didn't seem suited for our work. So I started talking with Anton about giving up our studio and renting a smaller, street-level

space instead. After we got our current storefront in Chinatown, we began talking about the possibility of incorporating a level of physicality into our projects. I remember around that time having a dinner conversation with Lawrence Weiner, where we started talking about immateriality, and he raised a very important question for me, which was the degree of dependence of our projects on electricity and the internet. After this conversation, I really became interested in bringing a more tangible dimension to our activities. I started discussing this with Anton, and I think that we both felt a little bit the same, so the moment was really ripe for this, and then after that, things happened really fast. ... That was the summer of 2004, and within 2 months of the conversation we had started the e-flux video rental project.

HUO: Artist-run space, artist-run time to liberate space? To liberate time? Then can you talk about the economy of e-flux and how it changed in time?

AV: Liberated space/time? Hans Ulrich, this is really a question for the early 20th century; it would be interesting to know what Malevitch or Chlebnikov would say to this. That was exactly their project: art liberating humanity from space/time dictatorship – i.e. materialism. Victory over sun.

Liberated exactly from what – alienation? I think most artists function in very alienated conditions: if you are “successful,” the product of your labor immediately becomes someone else's property, enriching a number of middlemen in the process, and you are actually separated from it – so basically for most part artists feed the market (if they are so lucky) and in return get a semblance of economic stability and attention, or a hope of attaining these things one day. Or, if one goes via a public route, you basically become instrumentalized for all sorts of unrelated agendas from urban renewal to the building of “official” national cultural links or the enlargement of civic space, etc. This all sounds very negative, but it is how the art system operates right now. I don't know where “artist's liberty” comes in – the art world is

really a private or state-operated factory.

Molly Nesbit told me once that Duchamp had a very strange approach to circulating his work: basically he either did not sell anything or intentionally sold it at prices that were merely symbolic as he did not want to depend on sales of his work; he made his livelihood by sales of the works of others. I read a book of his letters recently, and it seems he was pragmatically turning down exhibitions for decades, while quite a number of galleries in Paris wanted to show and deal his work. It's easy to forget just what an obscure figure he was from the 1920s to early 1960s, that he was completely absent from most art-history books written during that time. Most people then were only peripherally aware of him as an artist who showed some sort of a scandalous painting in New York once ... It's really remarkable that he chose to disengage from certain aspects of the art system, while, at the same time, staying completely engaged with its other sides: curating shows, advising, designing exhibitions, etc. What a peculiar choice!

I think for e-flux, the idea of liberating space and time consists of not being at all concerned with exhibitions, but entirely occupied by other types of activity. Space becomes free as it's not tied to any specific objects or their display and valuation. Time is also regained as there is no responsibility for a serial progression of presentations. This is possible in part because our economy allows this: we have no obligation to any sponsor to deliver a certain amount of "cultural production" or events in exchange for their support, because even from the start independence was a key goal. I really don't think it's feasible to think of alternative practices or organizations without rethinking their economic links and dependencies on the existing system.

HUO: How did the mailing list of e-flux grow? Was it a master plan or self organization or both? Ever.

AV: There was no master plan whatsoever. In the

beginning it was about a hundred email addresses of friends, then it just snowballed as people started subscribing. There were also a couple of important contributions – Kenny Goldsmith donated a small database that he developed for his site on experimental poetry, it had about five hundred addresses of artists and critics, and Wolfgang Staehle from thing.net also gave us their contacts – perhaps a thousand or 15 hundred in total. That was all in 1999, and since then all new readers have been self-subscribed. There was one year that was particularly active, I think around or just before the time we presented *Do It*, in 2002. The mailing list virtually doubled that year. It has leveled off a bit since then because the international contemporary art community is not all that large, but it is still growing at a steady rate of about two thousand new readers per year or so. What is very important to realize is that e-flux is a very intensive news service; it is not for everyone since we distribute 3 press releases each day – for many people who are not actively involved in contemporary art, it is just too intense. For us this is very good as it naturally focuses the readership to people who need all this information.

HUO: Can you tell me about organization and self-organization in relation to e-flux?

AV: Self-organization is a very fashionable notion right now. I suppose this is a direct response to a dissatisfaction with existing public institutions, which are really going through a big crisis; they want to be useful but just do not know how. This is really a fascinating topic because its history really goes back to the French Revolution and the establishment of the first public museums, etc. Personally I am very skeptical how all this will develop, particularly as we observe all these issues so closely since e-flux works with nearly 400 such institutions all over the world. Most of them, based in Europe and North America, are quite desperate to redefine their mandate and find an audience, to understand what to do with their collection in the absence of the type of the bourgeois subject for whom this whole structure was originally intended. Many of them try a kind of an "ethnic marketing," to borrow a term from my friend Tirdad Zolghadr, to diversify their audiences and reach different communities; others emphasize didactic educational programs which are

just terribly condescending both to these hypothetical audiences and to the artists' work. Other institutions, not based in the centers, are often just adopting the dominant methodology and ideology, and adding local accents to this without rethinking it too much, and this is sad as they are much more in a position to reinvent all this. So on the official, state-mandated level it is all very, very stagnant.

For me what is important about these other, self-organized initiatives is that quite often they can identify needs that are real, that are not contrived. This was precisely the case with e-flux, as I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. There was a need for a new platform for communications on contemporary art. This need somehow encompassed both the extremely local level and the much larger, global scene. I am not sure whether it was intuition or just good luck, but by addressing very concrete needs of disseminating information on an obscure project in the Chinatown Holiday Inn, we touched on a much larger need out there. It is similar with the projects we do, like the e-flux video rental or Martha Rosler Library.



That is to say that we are not at all interested in public service, but by addressing our own needs and interests, we sometimes find ourselves touching on certain things commonly lacking. I think this is probably similar to some of the other “self-organizations.” But as Julieta once pointed out to me, its very important not to turn this approach into another methodology or an academic structure, because that would just kill it.

HUO: It would be interesting to hear from you how the idea of this book came about. Is it a retrospective of e-flux edited through/with its friends? It also looks at the e-flux announcement as a medium ...

AV: This book was Julieta’s idea, so perhaps she could speak about this, but for my part, I hope the book will raise this topic of the public sphere in contemporary art and how it is articulated through all these press releases, communiqués, statements, announcements, etc. There has been very little research done in this area while it has been undergoing a rapid transformation over the past decade, since contem-

porary art became such an internationalized field and curatorial practice gained much more visibility. e-flux is very much complicit in the process because we offered a possibility of mass communication to something that was previously written for very few – the art press comprises just a few international periodicals and some local newspapers, so an institution or a curator never intended these texts to be read by more than one hundred people at the most. Now that there is a possibility to reach many thousands of people all around the world with this type of material, it seems its authors are becoming more self-conscious ... Then of course there is the issue of the hegemony of the English language, which is also really interesting to consider. Finally I hope that the book can also function as a useful resource for people interested in exhibition-making.

JÁ: Over time we noticed that so much of the information distributed by e-flux is related to events that go largely unrecorded – a moving exhibition on the Trans Siberian express, the Emergency Biennale in Chechnya, to mention a couple. The idea for the book came out of a conversation I

had with Anton last year. I don’t think of it as a retrospective of e-flux; I don’t even really think about the book in terms of e-flux. I think of this project more as a survey and as an organized record of all those events and situations that we have been so lucky to be in contact with over the past seven years.

HUO: You started e-flux in New York and now you are also moving to Berlin ...

AV: Julieta and I have been discussing starting something in Berlin for a couple of years. It’s a very amazing city right now, with an incredible concentration of artists, writers, historians, etc. What is very important here is that there seems to be the kind of public that is very hard to find in New York – people who take being an audience seriously. Perhaps this has something to do with a lesser economic pressure or maybe it’s a German thing. In New York I always feel that in fact there is no real audience: there are mainly masses of entrepreneurs and consumers. For example when we had e-flux video rental at our space it was often very disappointing that artists would come without any

intention to see any of the hundreds of video works we had, but mainly to ask if we could include their video. Then there were also collector types, like one gentleman who started to complain that we don’t offer a video delivery service to his neighborhood on the upper east side ... I guess I am really interested in a dynamic that is more analytical and less entrepreneurial, and it seems this can be found in Berlin right now.

But your question on the phone was actually about more than me moving to Berlin; it was more about this new condition which is kind of unprecedented, that it is possible for artists not to gravitate to one center but to stay and work from many different locations. I think this is a very very good thing and will bring about much needed changes to the art field over time. This is also something that e-flux is very conscious of and that we have tried to support in various ways.

**HUO: Two more questions:
How do you see the future of e-flux?
And the future?
The future will be ...**

AV: Of course the future is really a key question right now in many different ways. I grew up in the 1970s, when the ideal of a progressive future was still a very strong cultural symbol both in the East and in the West. Recently Julieta and I were discussing this with Martha Rosler in the context of the very famous correspondence between Adorno and Benjamin, which seems to exemplify a tendency with almost all artists, writers and others in the 20th century: while there were very many positional differences between “cultural producers,” almost all shared a belief that they were working towards a progressive future, a part of a much larger social project. This common social project does not exist any longer in a way that can be articulated. While the notion of progress is still essential to contemporary artistic practice, it is completely fragmented, individualized, “privatized.” Part of this is probably the effect of the post-communist condition, as so much of these forward-looking positions, in theory and in art practice, were directly or indirectly based on various strains Marxism. So I think for e-flux, the really ambitious project in the near future will be to investigate possibilities for a common social project for our times.

So I really hope the future will happen again.