

do it

nigunyle bue — Keykjanik

Lä-bas

si j'y suis.

Invités à tous.

Bertrand Lavier

Note from Bertrand Lavier, 1996

## Introduction

Hans-Ulrich Obrist

## do it

*the exhibition between actualization and virtualization, repetition and difference*

*do it* began in 1993 with a discussion among Christian Boltanski, Bertrand Lavier, and myself in the Café Select, Paris. Both artists have been interested in various forms of instructional procedures since the early 1970s, and that evening they spoke of the instructions contained within their own work. Since the 1970s Lavier has made many works that contain written instructions in order to observe the effects of translation on an artwork as it moves in and out of various permutations of language. Boltanski, like Lavier, is also interested in the notion of interpretation as an artistic principle. He thinks of his instructions for installations as analogous to musical scores which, like an opera or symphony, go through countless realizations as they are carried out and interpreted by others. From this encounter arose the idea of an exhibition of do-it-yourself descriptions or procedural instructions which, until a venue is found, exist in a static condition. Like a musical score, everything is there but the sound.

*do it* (museum)

In 1993, in cooperation with the AFAA (Association Française d'Action Artistique), twelve original *do it* texts

## Some fragments on the history of do-it-yourself art.

The media theoretician Friedrich Kittler sees logarithmic instructions and verification processes (which can be realized in each applied material) as points of departure for most modern works of art. In light of Durer's rules of geometric construction he comes to the conclusion: A logarithm stands before each painting.

The historical background for *do it* is to be found in the area of Ready-Made/Fluxus/Situationalism.

Marcel Duchamp is the originator of operational instructions for artworks. In notes titled *Speculations*, such instructions are to be found: "Make a picture or a sculpture, as one who would unravel a roll of cinema film;"

were translated into eight languages and sent as a diplomatic dispatch to each country with which France maintains diplomatic relations. The first *do it* took place in September 1994 at the Ritter Kunsthalle in Klagenfurt, Austria. The exhibition has since been realized in Bangkok, Bogotá, Brisbane, Geneva, Glasgow, Helsinki, Ljubljana, Nantes, Paris, Reykjavik, Siena, Thallin, and Uppsala.

*do it* is governed by a few "rules of the game:"

- 1) Each museum must select and create at least fifteen of the thirty potential actions/artworks. The process of selection ensures that not only will the individual artworks diverge (like Lavier's translations) as a result of interpretation, but that a new group constellation will emerge each time the exhibition is presented.
- 2) The instructions are to be realized by museum personnel or by the community at large. Neither I nor the artists are to be involved in the realization of the exhibition. There will be no artist-created "original."
- 3) The participating artists' do-it-yourself descriptions from which the exhibition is recreated each time should be approached with a spirit of "free interpretation." There will be no traditional "signature" of the artist so that *do it* artworks cannot accrue a static "character."
- 4) At the end of each *do it* exhibition the presenting institution is obliged to destroy the artworks and the instructions from which they were created, thus removing the possibility that *do it* artworks can

---

... fragments ... continued

"buy a dictionary and strike out the words that can be stricken." Duchamp commented: "These notes all had something in common: they were always written as infinitive. 'A l'infinitif' means doing things, finally doing that, which I never did."

The do-it-yourself works by Duchamp described above can be permanently actualized and are (in contrast to their static counterparts) not bound to aging objects.

The rules of play for The Exquisite Corpse (*Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau*): "They sit five at a table. Each of them notes on a sheet of paper, hidden from the others, a noun, which is to serve as the subject of

become standing exhibition pieces or fetishes. (See # 6 for exceptions.)

- 5) The discrete components from which the artworks were made are to be returned to their original context, making *do it* almost completely reversible. The mundane is transformed into the uncommon and is then converted back into the everyday. *do it* appears in order to disappear.
- 6) Several artists have proposed an alternative to the total reversal and destruction of *do it* exhibitions—a *do it* "economy"—whereby artworks realized per the artists' instructions may be "authorized" as "originals" and in this way become the property of museum visitors or even institutionalized as part of a museum collection through a one-time payment to the artist.
- 7) Each artist participating in *do it* receives complete photographic documentation of their work.

*do it* stems from an open exhibition model, an exhibition *in progress*. Individual instructions can open empty spaces for occupation and invoke possibilities for the interpretation and rephrasing of artworks in a totally free manner. *do it* effects interpretations based on location, and calls for a dovetailing of local structures with the artworks themselves. The diverse cities in which *do it* takes place actively construct the artwork context and endow it with their individual marks or distinctions.

---

... fragments ... continued

a sentence. After this sheet has been folded so that the script cannot be seen, they give it to their neighbor..."

André Breton's operational instructions for *Ecriture Automatique*: "Write quickly without pre-set theme, fast enough, so that nothing is retained, and then one is not tempted to read over."

In poetry there is the continuous daily praxis of the things-to-do-poems, from Frank O'Hara to Ted Barrigan and Bernadette Meyer to Eileen Myles in the present. The things-to-do-poems furthermore create a bridge to political activism, which is indeed constantly concerned with operational instructions.

For example, some of the artists' instructions specify the participation of community members. Most instructions are relational in that they construct bridges between various communities and performance sites. The everyday, profane context of the exhibition site flows into the exhibition space according to the individual artists' instructions. The boundaries between interior and exterior become porous.

It is important to bear in mind that *do it* is less concerned with copies, images, or reproductions of artworks, than with human interpretation. No artworks are shipped to the venues, instead everyday actions and materials serve as the starting point for the artworks to be recreated at each "performance site" according to the artists' written instructions. Each realization of *do it* occurs as an activity in time and space. The essential nature of this activity is imprecise and can be located somewhere between permutation and negotiation within a field of tension described by repetition and difference. Meaning is multiplied as the various interpretations of the texts accumulate in venue after venue. No two interpretations of the same instructions are ever identical.

*Shouldn't scores be simply published in the newspaper, or available as printed cards or sheets of paper to be sent to anyone?*

George Brecht, Notebooks I, II, III (1958-1959)

#### ... fragments ... continued

In the 1960s Czech collage artist and writer Jiri Kolar composed do-it-yourself instructions for exhibitions at his home (see page 89). Spanish poet and artist Joan Brossa used the same form for his *Projects for poems* (see page 35).

In 1968 Jerry Rubin initiated revolutionary moments with the battle cry "DO IT." He inverted the all-manipulative media game and himself manipulated it by playing the role of media infiltrator. Rubin understood that the revolutionary youth movement needed a logo and a name and from this conviction he created the concept of the Yippies as well as YIP (Youth International Party).



California Do-it center® circular, 1996

#### ... fragments ... continued

Artist Joe Brainard on Andy Warhol's unmediated "do it" spirit:

Andy Warhol's paintings have 'presence.' Andy Warhol's paintings have 'face.' I like 'paintings' that have 'face' and 'presence'... Andy Warhol knows what he is doing. Andy Warhol 'does it.' I like painters who 'do it.' Andy do it.

Lawrence Weiner hit the point of the artists' multiple choices as follows:

1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

*do it* (home)

*do it* (home) is concerned with the home use of artists' do-it-yourself instructions. In 1995 when I flew back to London from Glasgow the plane circled for more than an hour over the suburbs of London before landing. While we circled I imagined the same recording, playing simultaneously on tape, CD, radio, or TV in the suburban homes below.

What interested me was not the idea that an identical event take place in every house over which the plane circled, but rather the hypothetical and playful notion of dispersion, and the potential of an art exhibition to extend beyond its traditional limits. Thus arose the idea of a *do it* home version in the form of a book and a web site with texts for home use. As I write, I have received approximately two hundred contributions from all over the world, from philosophers, scientists, poets, and musicians, twenty of which are included in this exhibition and are intended for you to devise at home.

The complete *do it* (home) instructions will be published in a do-it-yourself manual in 1998.

*do it* (TV)

A third *do it* version, consisting of *do it* video clips, has been produced by the Vienna-based museum in progress and the Austrian TV Institute, ORF. The clips, which artists conceive themselves, include, to date,

---

... fragments ... continued

Beginning in 1961 Alison Knowles wrote an important series of event scores (instructions for events carried out) which anticipate *do it*. These event scores were published in *A Great Bear Pamphlet* (1965) which included scores for *Shuffle # 7*, 1961 ("The performer or performers shuffle into the performance area and away from it, above, behind, around, all through the audience. They perform as a group or solo...but quietly") and *Proposition*, 1962, ("Make a salad").

The sources of relations among people and things as well as their combinations of references and constellations are brought to an explosion in Georges Perec's 1978 novel, *Life as Operational Instructions*.

work by Gilbert & George, Leon Golub, Douglas Gordon, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Shere Hite, Robert Jelinek, Ilya Kabakov, Jonas Mekas, Eileen Myles, Yoko Ono, Steven Pippin, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Michael Smith, Nancy Spero, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Lawrence Weiner, and Erwin Wurm. Selections from *do it* (TV) can be seen in conjunction with *do it* (museum).

---

... fragments ... continued

Guy Dubord and his partner Gil Wolman estrange operational instructions from their objective through the use of parody. Sources are scattered. The concept of the original is nullified in a situational potlatch. Dubord and Wolman describe the "indifference for a sense-depleted and forgotten original... Everything can be used." Operational instructions are thus employed, as in the "psycho-geographical game of the week" for the purpose of constructing situations (cf. Roberto Orth's phantom avant-garde).