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Art by Instruction and the Pre-History of *do it*

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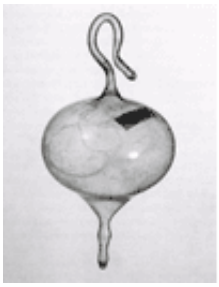
The following essay is reproduced from "*do it*," the exhibition's catalogue which was produced by Independent Curators International (ICI). ICI organized the '*do it*' exhibition and toured it in the Americas from 1998 through 2001. The accompanying book is available from ICI or through D.A.P.

> *The aesthetic 'attitude' is restless, searching, testing- it is less attitude than action: creation and re-creation.*
> ---------- Nelson Goodman1*

***do it* unites two strategies employed at key moments by the conceptual avant-garde: the generation of a work by following written instructions, and the insertion of chance in the realization of an artwork. Both of these techniques have also surfaced throughout the history of the avant-garde exhibition. The reason is not hard to find, for not only have such exhibitions sought to instantiate the ideas of the works contained within them, but advanced exhibitions have come more and more to be approached as artworks in their own right. Since the 1960's the contemporary curator has come to be seen as a kind of artist, an auteur creating visual and conceptual experiences related to those of the works exhibited. What we find in the pre-history of *do it*, then is something like three parallel narratives, development tied to changing conceptions of the artwork, the exhibition, and the curator.**

In all of these areas, the critical progenitor is Marcel Duchamp. While one can look to the studios of the Renaissance, say, for works created by individuals other than the artist-of attribution, the modern tactic of removing the execution from the hand of the artist appears in 1919 when Duchamp sent instructions from Argentina for his sister Suzanne and Jean Crotti to make his gift for their April marriage. To create the oddly named wedding present, *Unhappy Ready-Made*, the couple was told to hang a geometry text on their balcony so that wind could " go through the book [and] choose its own problems..." Duchamp produced another instruction-work in 1949, when he asked Henri-Pierre Roch to make a second *50cc Air de Paris* (fig.1) after Walter Arensberg's original had been broken, directing Roch to return to Paris pharmacy that Duchamp had visited in 1919 and have the druggist empty and re-seal the same kind of glass ampule as was used originally.2* Duchamp's use of chance had emerged earlier with the *Three Standard Stoppages* of 1913, created by dropping meter-long threads onto a canvas to generate new units of length that mock the idea of the standard meter. (That same year Duchamp and his sisters, Yvonne and Magdeleine, wrote *Musical Erratum* by placing notes on a staff in the order in which they were randomly drawn from a bag.) And as a curator, in April 1917 Duchamp installed the First Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists by using, in effect, two chance procedures. For his New York show of 2,125 works, Duchamp directed that pieces be arranged alphabetically by artist's last name, determining by a lot the letter "R" with which the installation began.3*



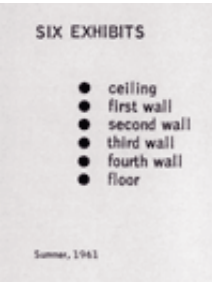
(fig.1)

Marcel Duchamp
Ready - Made, 50cc Air de Paris, 1919
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.

While *do it* does not explicitly employ chance operations, its content is determined by a procedure whose results cannot be foreseen, so, as far as the curator and organizers are concerned, the process is functionally equivalent to chance. For viewers, on the other hand, the experience of the exhibition involves as awareness both of what is and what might have been. Both these perspectives point to the work of John Cage, whose role in the geneses of art-by-instruction is central. In a series of classes given at the New School for Social Research between 1956 and 1960, Cage influenced a generation of artists who would develop the performance script into an art form, and lay the ground for Happenings and Fluxus.4* Having earlier embraced chance compositional procedures as a means of effacing his own likes and dislikes (and, as he put it, " imitating nature in her manner of operation"), Cage encouraged students who already were using chance in their work - such as George Brecht and Jackson Mac Low - and prompted others - such as Allan Karpow, Dick Higgins and Al Hanson - to do so. And his

classroom assignments led to instructions for events and performances that yielded some of the most important intermedia activity of the late 1050s and early 1960s.

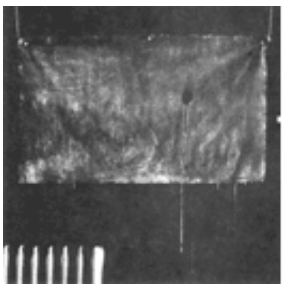
Out of the Cage class came the kind of event cards for which Fluxus would become well-known, an evocative form whose power is best appreciated in the 1959-66 works of George Brecht published by the movement's impresario George Maciunas in a box called *Water Yam*. While most Fluxus event cards are performance scripts, *Water Yam* also includes instructions for the creation of objects or tableaux - obscure directions whose realization left almost everything to the realizer. In such works as *Six Exhibits* ("ceiling, first wall, second wall, third wall, fourth wall, floor") (fig.2) and Egg ("at least one egg"), Brecht applied to objects and physical situations the freedom of execution and openness to serendipity that is the hallmark of a Fluxus performance. As we can see in the pieces contributed by Allan Karpow and Alison Knowles to *do it*, alumni of the Cage class and their associates continue to work in this spirit.



(fig.2)

George Brecht
Six Exhibits, 1961

More than Brecht, however, Yoko Ono was the artist during this period who most significantly focused on the creation of objects from instructions. Although she never studied with Cage, her husband at the time, composer Toshi Ichiyanagi, was in the New School class, and Ono was an active participant in the surrounding milieu. At the time Ono was best known for the series of events that she and La Monte Young organized in her Chambers Street loft, beginning in December 1960, but more interesting for us is her July 1961 exhibition at George Maciunas' AG Gallery. Here she displayed a group of works in the process of realization, made from instructions to be carried out by visitors. *Painting to be Stepped On*, for instance, called for viewers to walk on a canvas laid on the gallery floor, and *Smoke Painting* (fig.3) was to be realized by visitors burning the canvas with cigarettes and watching the smoke rise. Ono took next logical step in her May 1962 exhibition at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo, where instead of objects created by instructions she displayed only the instructions on sheets of white paper. In this show ideas - exhibited as verbal directions - were marked as central. Yoko Ono released her paintings in the world, in the form of instructions, like the butterfly whose release in the concert hall constitutes La MonteYoung's most poetic instruction piece. Calling for participation by others in an ongoing, free artistic process, Ono's instruction book *Grapefruit*, first published in Japan in 1964.5* An important aspect of such work is the tension between ideation and material realization, for while these pieces seem to be created by being imagined, as instructions for physical action they stake a further claim in the world.



(fig.3)
Yoko Ono
Smoke Painting, 1961

Smoke Painting: Light canvas or any finished painting with a cigarette at any time for any length of time. See the smoke movement. The painting ends when the whole Canvas or painting is gone. 1961 summer

Art in which ideas are primary, and are presented via verbal description, would reach its apogee within a decade in the broader conceptual art movement. But the story of art-by-instruction first tales a turn into more rigorous sculptural practice with Minimalist fabrication. Of course sculpture has a long history of works created by craftsmen casting or carving from the artist's maquettes and directions. And certain modern masters, such as Joan Miró, had extended this practice by having pieces fabricated according to oral or written instructions.6* But the Minimalists were motivated very differently than earlier sculptors, for their use of industrial fabrication was a reaction - as was the work of Cage and Fluxus circles - to the aesthetic ideology of Abstract Expressionism. 7* When Donals Judd, Robert Morris or Dan Flavin had sculptures fabricated from construction drawings, they were striking a blow against that

movement's focus on the artist's hand and the central position held by the subjectivity of the maker.

In Minimalist practice, as in *do it*, instructions and anonymous fabrication impose a distance between the artist and the realized artwork. The role of the artist is thus transformed from maker to conceiver. This connection between Minimalism and conceptualism was made clear by Sol LeWitt in his important " Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," published in June 1967 in *Artforum*. Here LeWitt valorized ideas rather than their physical instantiations, and he accepted unrealized concepts as works in their own right. And as concepts became the focus their linguistic expression was admitted as an artistic form. Artworks could be embodied in statements, and a collection of statements could constitute an exhibition.

The move from conceptual work to conceptual exhibition was made by dealer/publisher/organizer Seth Siegelaub in his exhibition *Douglas Huebler: November, 1968*. Lacking an exhibition space, Siegelaub presented Huebler's show in the form of a catalog alone. Here Huebler's pieces - space-time construction imperceptible at any one time or place - appeared as verbal descriptions, maps and other documentation. The next month Siegelaub published *Lawrence Weiner. Statements*, not explicitly introduced as an exhibition but clearly functioning that way. Weiner's works were presented in written form - " Two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard aerosol spray can" (fig.4) - and they each specified a material process that could be carried out in the world. (Whether his instructions ever were carried out, whether the work actually was physically realized, was a matter of indifference to Weiner, who left that decision to the "receiver.") In January 1969 Siegelaub mounted his most famous exhibition in an unused office on East 52nd Street in New York, yet even here the catalogue was fundamental. For while the exhibition known as *The January Show* displayed in physical space pieces by Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, Siegelaub insisted that the catalogue was primary: " The exhibition consists of (the ideas communicated in) catalogue; the physical presence (or the work) is supplementary to the catalogue."8*

(fig.4)

Lawrence Weiner
Two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard aerosol spray can, 1968
Courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. The LeWitt Collection.

By 1969 the international art world was exploding with art-by-instruction, much of it created for radical exhibitions mounted in Europe and North America. The proliferation of the form was driven by two factors: The nature of much new art allowed for its being made on the basis of artists' directions, and the great demand by curators of large shows for pieces from artists unable to travel to distant venues. I cite a few examples from two of the most important exhibitions of that heady year: Lucy Lippard's *557.089* and *955,000* (two versions of a show named for the populations of the cities in which it was mounted - Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia), and Harald Szeemann's *When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Process-Concepts-Situations-Information (Live in Your Head)*.9* For *557.089* Robert Smithson sent instructions for a work consisting of 400 photographs to be taken with a Kodak Instamatic camera of deserted Seattle horizons (fig.5); and for *955,000*, Jan Dibbets sent directions for recording a tape of the sounds of a car trip of up to thirty miles, with the driver verbally counting out the miles driven, to be played continuously in the exhibition under a map of the rout taken. For *When Attitudes Become Form*, Robert Morris instructed the Kunsthalle staff to collect as many different kinds of combustible materials as were available in Bern, and beginning with one kind add different sorts of materials at units of time to be determined by dividing the length of the exhibition by the number of materials. On the last day of the exhibition, with all the materials having been "placed freely in the space," they were removed and burned outside the museum. And for both Lippard's and Szeemann's exhibitions, Sol LeWitt sent detailed instructions for the creation of wall drawings. The work-by-instruction created by American and European artists during this exciting period, and the curatorial activity that often elicited these pieces, constitute the critical precedent for *do it*.10*

(fig.5)

Robert Smithson
instruction card for
400 Seattle Horizons, 1969

Like many of the avant-garde exhibitions of this century, *do it* itself exemplifies the characteristics of the art that it contains. Just as important surrealist exhibitions were themselves surreal works in the form of constructed environments - witness Duchamp's installation of the 1938 *International Exposition of Surrealism*, or Frederick Kiesleer's design of Peggy Guggenheim's *Art of this Century* (1942) and of the Hugo Gallery's exhibition *Bloodflames* (1947) - *do it* is a work of the same kind as its components.11* *do it* is a do-it, a work to be realized from instructions, and as with other pieces of art-by-instruction it can be done simultaneously in more than one place. The exhibition comes with rules that must be followed by the institutions mounting the show; the requirement that works be destroyed after the exhibition for example. But like all art-by-instruction, *do it* is essentially open, allowing for a range of realizations according to the interpretations, choices and constraints of those who follow the directions. Like the works comprising it, *do it* is a multiple of potentially unlimited variety and number.

These features of instruction-works raise philosophical questions regarding the identity of such pieces, and therefore about the nature of this sort of artwork. The questions are of two kinds. First, what exactly is the artwork here - the idea as stated in a set of directions, or the actual words and instructions diagrams themselves, or the set of all realizations?12* Wittgensteinian worries about what it is to follow a rule - a consequence of any rule or instruction being interpreted in so many different ways - prompt a second set of questions: How closely must one follow the instructions of *do it*, or of the works comprising the show, to count as realizing this exhibition, or that particular work? How important in this regard are the curator's or the artist's intentions, and what other factors are relevant? It would be foolhardy to try to settle these matters here, but the pre-history of *do it* suggests answers that emphasize openness of interpretation and that move in the direction of freedom.

Freedom and openness to novel exhibition forms characterize *do it* and Obrist's curatorial work in general. Very much in the spirit if his avant-garde precursors - beginning with Jules Lévy, whose 1882 Arts *incohérents* exhibition in his Paris apartment looks forward to Obrist's 1991 and 1993 exhibitions in his Swiss kitchen and Paris hotel room13* - Obrist has sought to show art in new ways and in unexpected places. While he departs from his predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s by wholeheartedly accepting the museum as a legitimate venue, reasoning from the inevitable institutionalization of successful anti-institutional forms, Obrist has sought space for freedom within the museum by such artistic interventions as his *Migrateurs* series at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris. *do it* also creates such a space within the museum.

This lack of being burdened by *do it*'s historical predecessors also characterizes the work of the younger artists in the show, such as Jason Rhoades and Rirkrit Tiravanija, who are at home in the establishment settings that once made their older colleagues so uncomfortable. The spirit of *do it* thus is very much of our time, enjoying in post-modern pastiche both nostalgia for the 1960s and accommodation with the institution. This is clear from the exhibition title, which prompts two very different associations: Jerry Rubin's battle cry from 1968 - the year of Obrist's birth - and the familiar advertising slogan for Nike athletic shoes. *do it* is a delicate high wire act, balancing subversion with curatorial and artistic renewal. And with these instructions in hand, it is an easy act to follow.

Bruce Altshuler is the director of the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum and author of The *Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century*

NOTES

↑ 1. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, New York and Kansas City: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968), P.242.

↑ 2. Marcel Duchamp, quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), P.212. On re-creating *50 cc Air de Paris*, see P-374.

↑ 3. For this exhibition, Duchamp's installation and its critics, see Francis Naumann, *New York Dada*

1915-23 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), PP-76-r9i.

↑ 4. For a detailed account ofthis class, and its influence on the development ofintermedia art forms, see Bruce Altshuler, "The Cage Class," in Cornelia Lauf and Susan Hapgood, eds., *FluxAttitudes* (Gent, Belgium: Imschoot Uitgevers, 1991), PP.17-23

↑ 5. Yoko Ono has written that her primary interest in these works is in "painting to construct in your head," tracing their origin to childhood experiences of hunger in wartime Japan, when she and her brother "exchanged menus in the air." ["To The Wesleyan People (who attended the meeting)-a footnote to my lecture of January 13th, 1966" in Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1970), n.p.] Ono's piece for *do it*, instructing visitors to write their wishes on pieces of paper and tie them to a tree, recalls her Japanese childhood as well, when she would visit a temple and tie her wishes to a tree along with those of other supplicants.

↑ 6. According to Georges Hugnet in "Joan Miró, ou l'enfance de l'art" (*Cahier d'Art*, VI, 7-8, PP- 335-40), Miró sent instructions to a carpenter to make such works as the 193o *Relief Construction* now at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. For this reference I thank Anne Umland of the Museum of Modern Art.

↑ 7. Two artists associated with Minimalism, Robert Morris and Walter De Maria, first made such sculptural objects as part of performances related to early Fluxus. See Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry A. Abrams, 1994), pp.223 and 233.

↑ 8. For an account ofthese works and exhibitions, see Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, pp.236-43.

↑ 9. *When Attitudes Become Form* was mounted at the Kunsthalle Bern (Switzerland) in March-April 1969, and traveled to the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany and to London's institute of Contemporary Art. Instructions for works in both of these exhibitions are included in their catalogs, with the catalog for 557,o87 consisting of a set of four-by-six-inch cards that details each piece. Also see Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp.iio-i2, and Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, pp.243-55 While instructions for works in such exhibitions generally were provided to the curator in written form, an important exception is Jan van der Marck's 1969 show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, *Art by Telephone*, for which instructions could be communicated only by telephone.

↑ 10. There are many subsequent instruction works, of course, and later exhibitions that embrace this form. Two noteworthy cases are Nina Felshin's *The Presence of Absence: New Installations*, organized in 1988 by Independent Curators Incorporated and containing instruction pieces by thirteen artists, and John Cage's Rolywholyover *A Circus*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 1993. *The Presence of Absence* traveled to eleven venues in 1989-9o, and-like do it-was realized simultaneously in different locations. Rolywholyover *A Circus*, which traveled internationally, included a huge number of non-instruction works, but the composition and installation of the exhibition constantly changed according to a Cage-created set of instructions employing chance operations.

↑ 11. For these exhibitions, see Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, Chapter 7.

↑ 12. This last suggestion follows Nelson Goodman's rich analysis of performance works, in Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Pp.99-123 and 177-221.

↑ 13. For Jules Uvy's apartment exhibition, see Dennis Phillip Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre," in Dennis Phillip Cate and Mary Shaw, eds., *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-garde*, 1875-1905 (New Brunswick, NJ: Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1996), p1. |