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Chicago's talkiest season begins with a long, long chat at art expo



Artist Theaster Gates, from left, and Obama Presidential Center museum director Louise Bernard participate in a discussion led by Hans Ulrich Obrist during the Expo Chicago at Navy Pier on Sept. 29, 2018. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

On Saturday afternoon, at the far end of Navy Pier, in a ballroom overlooking Lake Michigan, Hans Ulrich Obrist talked, and listened, then talked, and listened some more. He talked to 20 Chicago artists, poets, architects, essayists, MacArthur geniuses, sociologists. He did this for more than five hours, one person after another, sometimes pairing up artists and talking to two at once. He did not faint or take a bathroom break or sneak a granola bar as they spoke. He grew tired, his voice sounded hoarse, but the man never cracked.

Obrist is artistic director of the Serpentine Galleries in London; he was in town for the annual Expo Chicago art exhibition. Crowds gathered in the ballroom to listen to his conversations, only to drift away, then return again, then drift away, over and over, like the waves against the pier.

Artist Amanda Williams, best known for her brightly colored abandoned homes in Englewood, and a practice that innovatively pairs issues of social justice and class with architecture, told him: "What Chicago needs is for each of us to operate outside of our own best self-interests."

Photographer Dawoud Bey told him that he wanted to question our assumptions about community.

Louise Bernard, museum director of the Obama Presidential Center, told him that “we tend to think of presidential museums being of a particular time in history,” but the vision for the Obama Center is to inspire new generations of leaders, “in a broadest possible sense.”



Obrist paired artist Barbara Kasten, left, and architect Jeanne Gang. They hadn't met before the interview. (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

Many others said much more.

It was part performance art, part seemingly never-ending talk show, part stunt and part sincere inquiry: Can you locate the soul of a place though a long day of conversation?

It also served, unofficially, as the opening of talk season.

We don't have a good name for this yet — the Jabber Weeks? the Chatter Time? — but it exists. Every fall throughout Chicago, important figures sit on large stages and just, you know, talk to us. They do this from now until we feed our faces at Thanksgiving and stop talking. The Chicago Humanities Festival, which locally owns the format, begins its Fall Yapping at the end of October, offering Tom Hanks, Alice Walker and plenty of others. Chicago Ideas Week, starting Oct. 15, offers Ellie Kemper, Michael Eric Dyson and more. And of course there are Chicago's bookstores, which, nightly through October and November, offer conversations with authors, for free.

It's a lot to look forward to.

Or you could have knocked out the season in an afternoon with Swiss-born Obrist, who named his event “Creative Chicago: An Interview Marathon,” and — with help from the Humanities Festival's booking department — assembled a who's who of Chicago cultural life. Indeed, they even tried to book Rahm Emanuel to do his podcast during the event.

Didn't work out.

Perhaps the mayor didn't know what he was missing?

Obrist, whom *The New Yorker* named “the curator who never sleeps,” is celebrated in London for his marathons — or rather, “durational art.” He began in 2006 with a series of interviews that

lasted 24 hours (he checked himself into a hospital immediately after). Ever since, the Serpentine has had marathon events lasting three to 24 hours, often based around a theme, such as memory or extinction. At one marathon, filmmaker Agnes Varda dressed as a potato. At another, artist Damien Hirst lectured at 4 a.m.



Artists Art Green, from left, Gerald Williams and Suellen Rocca participate in the marathon discussion with Obrist (not shown). (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

The night before the Navy Pier event — Obrist's first marathon in the United States — he told me that he was "curating the city." He called it "a way of bringing together disciplines to construct an image of a place (this is) really far too complex to construct in any synthetic way." He said that he chose Chicago for the event because a large archive of his interviews is held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but also because a major influence on his chat-a-thons is Studs Terkel, Chicago's late king of conversation.

Obrist wanted to pay homage.

Long, slim, with heavy black eyeglass frames, he positioned himself more as a cultural tourist, one who had corralled a dream team of local guides for snippets of advice and character:

Tim Samuelson, official city historian, waving a pair of Eliot Ness' handcuffs, said he is organizing his decades of artifacts but fears he will be hit by a bus and no one will understand why he owned a pair of handcuffs. Eve Ewing, Chicago poet and sociologist, said, "No matter how many degrees you have, everyone is an expert on their own life."

Architect Stanley Tigerman, in a wheelchair at 88, said, "Architecture is the sport of Chicago. It's not the Cubs, Bulls, Bears or whatever animal has their name on a team."

Obrist sat all day before a backdrop designed by Chicago artist Barbara Kasten, a sculpture of colored plexiglass slats that suggested the rumpus room of the Fortress of Solitude. And as the day wore on, the shimmer from the lake faded and Kasten's colors glowed and became the focus. Indeed, compared with the hit-and-miss nature of many staged conversations in Chicago, this was an organic, living work of art, with its share of surprising refrains and flourishes.

Obrist asked nearly every artist to name an unrealized project, either "censored or self-censored

dreams.” Both Brandon Breaux, a painter known for his Chance the Rapper album covers, and Fatimah Asghar, poet and co-creator of the web series “Brown Girls,” in separate interviews, spoke of creating museums dedicated to their families; Amanda Williams and artist Cauleen Smith both spoke of deciding at some point in their careers that they would not ask permission to act boldly anymore.



Architect Stanley Tigerman declared, “Architecture is the sport of Chicago.” (Erin Hooley/Chicago Tribune)

Orbist also asked what Chicago needs.

Architect Jeanne Gang (and others, in various ways) said it needed “glue” to connect its disparate, increasingly unequal parts — perhaps even “something shocking to bring us back together in a common cause.” Artist Theaster Gates answered differently from most: Chicago needs friendships.

None of this is surprising.

And yet, with Obrist as the frame, it felt like art.

I’m a junkie for staged talks.

I have attended every New Yorker Festival — which is its own, overpriced Fall Yapping — since it began in 1999, more than my share of Humanities Festival events and countless bookstore chats. But none feel like art. Obrist — allowing roughly 15 minutes for each subject — crafted a new albeit cumbersome medium for painting a portrait of community.

He guided the ear the way others guide the eye.

Late in the afternoon, as he came to the most obvious of conclusions, that each of these artists is presenting his or her reality, and yet with Chicago as a collective canvas, the point became touching. Gates, for instance, called our thrift stores “the archives of America,” a tool he used to sharpen his eye, evolving for him from a place where he desired hip clothes to a place where he understood, by simply shopping for old clothes, that he was continuing a cultural legacy.

At times, Obrist, with a curator’s heart, paired artists who didn’t know each other, asking them to pose questions to each other. Kasten asked Gang why she stayed in Chicago; Suellen Rocca, of

Rocca, of the white '60s Chicago art collective the Hairy Who, asked Gerald Williams, of the black '60s Chicago art collective AfriCOBRA, about his early days as a teacher — like many of the artists brought together by Obrist, they share Chicago but had never met before.

You suspected Obrist hoped to create connections that lead to collaborations and more art. If there was suspense, it was contained in the question of whether Obrist could keep the project within five allotted hours. Mostly, he could. But he would not interrupt, not even the worst of the droners. Early on he played a clip of himself interviewing Terkel. He asked for advice, and Studs told him sharply: "Listen."