



Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia
of *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres*
to Julia Peyton-Jones et Hans-Ulrich Obrist

Serpentine Gallery, 26 February 2013

Chère Julia Peyton-Jones,

Cher Hans-Ulrich Obrist,

It's a pleasure to honour, in Hyde Park's most famous "little house on the prairie", the two people behind its spectacular international acclaim.

The formidable duo you make up at the head of the Serpentine inspires art professionals all over the world. Once again in 2012, the international rankings put you on their Top 10 lists of the most powerful figures in the art world.

Julia Peyton-Jones, for 22 years you've been synonymous with the Serpentine. Since 1991 you've led its renaissance, its success story and its struggles. In 2006 you achieved one of your finest feats: managing to bring over Hans Ulrich Obrist, the eternal nomad, one of the most curious minds of contemporary art, who enjoys never being where he's expected to be.

A fine linguist and shrewd connoisseur of France, Hans-Ulrich Obrist has often complained that your profession has no name in French. He's regularly denounced the word "*commissaire*", which has too authoritarian a ring... It's true that the right term has yet to be invented in our language. So I'm making you an offer, *cher* Hans-Ulrich Obrist: if you can find us an alternative to the disastrous French expression "*curater une exposition*", then France will be doubly grateful to you!

In the meantime, you must admit that the title "*commissaire d'exposition*" isn't so badly suited to the two leaders you are. I hardly dare allude here to Julia Peyton-Jones's

affectionate nickname, “the Mrs Thatcher of contemporary arts... because she can handbag anybody”!

Rather, I’m thinking of the unanimous admiration inspired by your partnership, which is variously described as a “dynamo”, an “engine” and a “powerhouse”. For beyond your intellectual kinship, you’re both exceptionally hard-working professionals – although Julia Peyton-Jones would rather speak modestly of “entrepreneurial spirit” and a necessary “ambition”.

You’ve dedicated this spirit of enterprise to promoting artists and instructing the public, and have been among the first to do so. In France, as you know, this spirit is gradually gaining ground within the cultural sector. It’s a pleasure now to confirm its success in disseminating the arts of our time.

Chère Julia Peyton-Jones,

Cher Hans-Ulrich Obrist,

I know that people in your field care little for labels of nationality. But in awarding you the finest distinction the French Republic possesses for artists and writers, I want to pay tribute to the invaluable work you do at the Serpentine to publicize French artists: the gallery has been an exceptional showcase for Philippe Parreno, Boltanski, Jean Nouvel and Anri Sala, who will be representing France at the next Venice Biennale. Nor do I forget the intellectuals – from Jacques Roubaud to Hélène Cixous to Alain Robbe-Grillet – whose resonance in contemporary thought you’ve so sensitively reflected here at the Serpentine

I know that the spirit of Claude Parent, the father of contemporary French architecture, is with us at this ceremony. May that loyal friend share in the tribute being paid to you today.

Chère Julia Peyton-Jones,

You're one of those discreet figures who set high standards and believe others must be judged on the basis of their deeds. Your nicknames speak for themselves: "the powerhouse *behind* the Serpentine's success story" and "the *mastermind* of the summer pavilions".

You share something with those visionary and rather zealous cathedral-builders who erected towers which they rarely saw to completion. In the space of 10 years, through the force of your imagination and your strength of will, you've transformed a modest, deserted "teahouse" into an international art centre of undisputed prestige.

Trained as an artist and a graduate of the Royal College of Art, you're fully conscious of the demands of a trade you practised in London for 10 years and to which your works exhibited at the Bank of England bear testimony. You've retained a clear-sighted view of the artistic professions, convinced that talent is nothing without the driving force of ambition.

What's impressive about your career is the way you've positioned yourself as a pioneer of future professions. At the end of the 1980s, you were an exhibition organizer and fundraiser at a time when those two activities were small-scale and didn't yet have names. You carried them out at Wapping, the Hayward Gallery and the Arts Council; and this twofold expertise prepared you for the challenges of the Serpentine.

Convinced that contemporary artists gain from being known, you set yourself apart by approaching, in a non-judgmental way, people unfamiliar with their art. In the face of the toughest financial realities, you've proven over the past 20 years that pragmatism and benevolence can go hand in hand. As a pioneer of fundraising for art in the UK, you've developed a philanthropic discourse and methods directly inspired by the American model of generosity. In 2007, this success led you all the way to the World Economic Forum in Davos, where you were the first representative of a museum institution ever to be invited to the debating table.

It must be said that you learned the hard way. In 1991, when you were put in charge of the Serpentine, it was on its knees, with an annual budget of £3,500. The roof was collapsing, water leaks were threatening the works and the heating dated back to the 1930s. A few months later, the Department of National Heritage spoke of withdrawing its licence. One MP put forward a miracle solution: to turn the gallery into a riding school.

You sought to galvanize public opinion. To save the Serpentine, £4 million was needed. It was a brutal realization: outside the limited milieu of art-lovers, the general public remained indifferent. This stark truth led you to redefine your mission: to make the place "necessary to everybody, not just the art world". For the past 20 years, that's been the Serpentine's express ambition.

Three decisive meetings enabled you to take up the challenge.

The first was the Princess of Wales, who offered you unique patronage. You've recalled how brave this commitment to contemporary art was at the beginning of the 1990s, at

a time when it still wasn't unusual to hear people questioning the direction in which Picasso had taken modern painting.

With her, you developed the art of bringing together supporters of all kinds, artists, sponsors and celebrities, at prestigious gala dinners – an expertise you've built upon in style through the Serpentine's annual Summer Party. As early as 1998, you were in a position to offer the Serpentine a facelift.

Meanwhile, you secured the favours of Michael Bloomberg. Sitting next to him at a dinner, you so hypnotized him that by the end of the evening he had publicly announced a phenomenal donation to the Serpentine. That same evening, in addition to the historic support he gave you, Michael Bloomberg embarked on his now well-known career as a huge supporter of contemporary art worldwide.

Through your passion, you brought artists on board: Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, and Gilbert and George contributed to major sales at Sotheby's to support you. You also invited the fashion world to join the adventure: Yves Saint Laurent, Jimmy Choo and Burberry helped you dream up unique events.

The results speak for themselves: at a time when most public institutions are being forced to rein in their activities, you're devising new programmes... and all this while retaining free entry to the Serpentine, a luxury you're determined to provide to the million or so visitors who flock through its doors every year.

In 2010, a new meeting allowed you to spread your wings. For 15 years you'd been eyeing the little Magazine building situated on the other side of the park. A gift from the Dr Mortimer and Theresa Sackler Foundation enabled you to provide the Serpentine with a twin location. Within a few months the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, its beauty enhanced by the architect Zaha Hadid, would offer a new springboard for emerging artists. Architecture, fashion, literature, dance, video, science and technology would find their place. The goal, you said, was to "create a model for a gallery of culture of our time". Through this interdisciplinary approach, you once again revolutionized the rules of museology, the better to highlight original artistic endeavour.

Chère Julia Peyton-Jones,

For the past 12 years you've also been a builder, in the true sense of the word. At the Serpentine, you've dared to organize an unprecedented marriage: that of contemporary art with architecture.

It all began in 2000. To host the Summer Party, you commissioned a temporary structure to showcase a famous architect. Zaha Hadid's universally-acclaimed pavilion would remain there for several months. The following year, Daniel Libeskind's met with the same reception. In the subsequent 10 years the biggest international names followed in succession: Oscar Niemeyer, Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel... It's now a fixture: an unmissable event in world architecture, but also a place of consecration coveted by foreign architects who haven't yet built in the UK.

Behind this commissioning programme, unique in the world, lay a brilliant intuition: if the general public still find architecture a difficult discipline, it's because they too often know it only through drawings, plans and photos. The third dimension, the sense of space, is paradoxically missing. By inventing this demanding and playful format, you enabled thousands of people to experience the "elevation of the spirit" produced by a skilfully-designed structure.

To people surprised by the absence of British talent from the programme – which is supported by public funds – you recall the purpose of your public institution: to introduce the public to artists they don't already know.

Your work can't be understood without focusing on this educational dimension. Your motto is "Art for all". Without idealism, you argue in favour of training the public in the art of their time. You care about the transferral of knowledge: you taught at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1980s and are now a professor at the University of the Arts, London, as well as a senior fellow of the Royal College of Art.

You gratefully link your success as a curator to your first mentors: Joanna Drew – former director of the Hayward Gallery, where you took your first curatorial steps – and the great critic David Sylvester.

Ever since your first masterpiece at the Serpentine – the "Broken English" exhibition of 1991 – you've brought an original vision and a habit of breaking new ground that command respect. In the hundred or so exhibitions you've organized, you've given major

artists like Doug Aitken, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince and Philippe Parreno their first opportunities in a public space in the UK.

This risk-taking in your curatorial choices does you credit, as does your personal commitment to the success of each individual project – two qualities no doubt anchored in your early taste for performance.

Today you have an exceptionally keen view of the contemporary arts. Your expertise is renowned; people everywhere turn to you to anticipate tomorrow's artistic trends. You foresaw the collapse of borders in art and the emergence of a globalized scene, with the centre of gravity shifting from West to East. You predict the advent of an art freed from all rules, practised by artists from all walks of life. Finally, you're convinced that tomorrow's art will spotlight science and technology.

Your expertise is equalled only by the generosity with which you dispense it. With great professionalism, you take on all the roles entrusted to you; the grand dame of contemporary art regularly tours the Venice Biennale in trainers to make herself more approachable to all.

This energy draws on invaluable support, beginning with that of Lord Palumbo, Chairman of the Serpentine's board of trustees. But nothing would have been possible without the loyal support of your sisters and aunt, at every stage of your exemplary career.

For this dedicated work of curiosity and conviction with contemporary artists, I'm happy to present you with a mark of the French Republic's recognition by making you a *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

Julia Peyton-Jones, au nom du ministre de la Culture et de la Communication de la République française, Aurélie Filipetti, et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Cher Hans Ulrich Obrist,

Your ubiquitous presence on the contemporary art scene has given rise to many legends. What with your enigmatic "Brutally Early Club" salons at 6.30 in the morning, and your night interview sessions with artists from all over the world, you are everywhere.

Firstly, because – like Julia Peyton-Jones – you have an insatiable appetite for work. But also because you simultaneously lead two quests, which you describe as obsessive: that of the archivist who toils at night, and the scientist who is already up at dawn experimenting. You never wanted to choose between the two: this is the hallmark of your original thought.

Born in Zurich, you went on to be a student in St Gallen, and are just like that city: possessed by books, with a legacy of humanist thinking and a sweet tooth for the encyclopaedic organization of knowledge.

Significantly, it is books which brought you to art.

As a teenager, you came across a book featuring Pierre Cabanne in conversation with Marcel Duchamp, and were instantly attracted to the idea of sustained conversations with an artist, over a period of time.

And so you launched what you call “endless conversation”: over the years, you built up an unrivalled body of interviews, nearly 2,500 hours of what you affectionately call your “archive”, and which you store in banana boxes in between Berlin and London.

From time to time you reveal selected extracts, with publications in 1996, 2003 and 2010.

You embarked on a collection of portraits, your “Conversation Series”, now in its 28th volume, after presenting artists ranging from Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster to Yoko Ono. You’ve been compared to Giorgio Vasari, because you record the history of your time through the history of its artists. But your “summa” aspires to embrace all spheres of knowledge. You’ve met writers, film-makers, philosophers and scientists, with names ranging from Michel Houellebecq and Edouard Glissant to the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot.

Today, many of your interlocutors have passed away. Your archive has set itself the task of fighting against oblivion, and soon, if I’m not mistaken, the Serpentine is going to enable you to make these hundreds of portraits accessible online.

The task you have set goes beyond biographical testimony; your maieutical art serves a fundamental objective: to detect future trends and sense what remains to be done in art.

For you, it's the artist who holds the keys to the world to come. In this respect, he or she must be heard. You've offered them inventive interview formats, which have sometimes dispensed with words – as was the case with Louise Bourgeois, who answered you by emailing drawings.

For the same reasons, your door is left open to artists, starting with the youngest. This is privileged access entrusted, it seems, to very, very few people...

Artists are at the heart of your vocation. Through contact with your artist grandmother and talented friends such as Gerhard Richter, you very soon realized that you wanted to devote yourself to them. At the age of 23, you were already a curator in Jouy-en-Josas. You invited Christian Boltanski and Fischli/Weiss to exhibit in your kitchen, then you repeated the experience in a hotel bedroom, before becoming curator in 1993 of a recently established art association in Vienna, "Museum in Progress", where you remained for seven years.

Cher Hans Ulrich Obrist,

This period marks the beginning of a fruitful oscillation between the world of institutions and experimentation, because in that same year, 1993, you started running the "Migrateurs" programme at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which you continued until 2006.

These simultaneous experiences gave you a dual vision of your profession.

In Switzerland, you grew up with the model of curator embodied by Harald Szeemaan. You then witnessed how Kasper König revolutionized the role of the “independent curator” in Austria and Germany. And in France, you discovered, working with Suzanne Pagé, the unique freedom of the curators who work in museums.

In 2000, you yourself were appointed curator at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, and spent six years in that special palace by the banks of the Seine.

Under Suzanne Pagé’s leadership, the museum underwent a complete renaissance. Kasper König had taught you that as a curator you must make yourself invisible to allow the public to come face to face with works. Suzanne Pagé advocated the same discretion and conveyed to you her great vision of the curator as the “*commis d’artistes*”. She advised you to be alert to other fields of knowledge, in order to understand the forces at work in the visual arts. Over the course of various exhibitions, you’ve established links with urban planning, science fiction and cutting-edge technology.

While your profession was still slowly emerging as such, you were acutely aware of the pioneering work of those who came before you. On discovering that the history of your profession still hadn’t been written about, you penned one of the very first books on the subject. In 2008, “A Brief History of Curating” filled a real gap in the history of art. This collection of interviews pays moving tribute to 11 giants in recent history, starting with Pontus Hulten, the founding director of the Pompidou Centre.

There was a headline that ran “Hans Ulrich Obrist: the man who made curating an art”. It’s fair to say that this book shone the spotlight on the little-known profession of curator, whose etymology you proudly point out is from the latin *curare*, “to take care of”.

Cher Hans Ulrich Obrist,

To France’s great regret, in 2006, Julia snatched you away and exported you to the UK. Since then, it’s here that you’ve been tirelessly devising ways of putting on exhibitions of the future. Today, as Director of Exhibitions and Programmes, and Director of International Projects, you say that the only rule that applies is summed up by what Diaghilev once said to Cocteau: “*étonne-moi*” (“amaze me”)!

In the direct tradition of the conceptual artists of the 1960s, you try to produce simple, reproducible exhibitions. For the periodical “*Point d’ironie*”, published by Agnès B., you invited artists themselves to fill pages which were created especially for that purpose. In 1997 the exhibition “Do It” invited visitors simply to follow instructions given by artists.

In 2007, when you took up responsibility for the Lyon Biennale alongside Stéphanie Moisdon, you proposed a new way of participating: you gave 50 young curators the choice of 50 artists to exhibit in the form of a monograph.

Concurrently, you’re pursuing complex reflexions on the future of the national scene in a globalized world. You recall that the issue can’t be glossed over as long as national systems of representation and national financing continue to exist, as at the Venice Biennale.

As a faithful reader of the thinking of Edouard Glissant, you believe in a global dialogue which, far from homogenizing everything, continues to leave room for national, regional and local differences.

You very intelligently create models highlighting the local scene. Within the Lyon Biennale, you dared to create two exhibitions devoted to the French scene, based on the principle that when one visits an international biennale one wants to know more about the local scene.

Finally, you stay true to the spirit of Georges Perec when devising projects where the rules are fixed but not the result. That's the case with the travelling exhibition "Cities on the move", which evolved as it passed through Shanghai, Bordeaux and New York. It's also the case with "Indian Highway", which went from the Serpentine to the outer reaches of China, metamorphosing at each stage of the journey through contact with the local communities.

Cher Hans-Ulrich Obrist,

You've said perceptively that we're living through a pivotal period, in which the history of art will no longer concentrate on art objects or collections but will open itself up to other forms, beginning with performance. One of the first people to raise your awareness of this was the playwright Eugène Ionesco, whom you had the good fortune to meet. Since then, you've constantly developed your thinking through dialogue with top-level French intellectuals. You're now considering the specific status of exhibitions devised by the artists themselves and, above all, trying to come up with a way to give exhibitions a lasting form that can be passed on to future generations.

This year, thanks to you, at the sixth “cultural marathon” which you organized at the Serpentine, the British public was able to meet directly with Jean-Yves Tadié, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Daniel Buren, Jacques Roubaud and Olivier Castel. For this, you well deserve our gratitude.

Cher Hans-Ulrich Obrist,

You, a child of May 1968, have marked out an original path in contemporary thought, between archive and avant-garde, experimentation and institutional commitment.

May the insignia of *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* be the deserved recognition of that profound originality.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, au nom du ministre de la Culture et de la Communication de la République française, Aurélie Filipetti, et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.