



Hans Ulrich Obrist Interview with Oscar Murillo

Hans Ulrich Obrist: How did you begin? How did you come to art? You were born in Colombia in '86; obviously Colombia has a very interesting art world. What were your introductions to art?

Oscar Murillo: Colombia didn't offer any instrumental art encounters in the Western sense. There were no museum encounters or art exhibitions, though having lived there was fundamental for me. I left Colombia when I was ten years of age and I didn't really have any confrontations or relationships with art. I was a kid who lived in a very small town, completely isolated.

HUO: What's the name of the town?

OM: La Paila, in the province of Valle del Cauca, which is close to Cali in the southeast of Colombia. It is a town in the middle of a mountain range and the main industry there is sugarcane, so generations of my family grew up working in these two sugarcane mills. It was a very hands-on labor industry. I grew up with tactile materials, building things and being tactile with objects. When I came to London there was an astonishing cultural displacement. Everything was completely different.

HUO: In 2011 you produced a series of paintings full of stains that looked almost like the floor of a painter's studio, and then in spring 2012 your exhibition in New York City of paintings *movement in three parts* had these graffiti-esque marks that brought to mind dirt and dust, as well as liquid elements, like water stains. There were also some gestural elements and some non-treated elements, but the overall feeling was that the paintings represented your studio.

I remember that Dieter Roth once did a piece of his studio floor as well—he just took the floor and changed it from horizontal to vertical. So similar to Roth's painting, your pieces from *movement in three parts* could be your studio floor, but presented horizontally. I was wondering how you came to that, if it was a chance finding?

OM: I'm glad you mentioned Dieter Roth because like Franz West he's another artist I've been interested in. I admire how he lives through his work, as he did with his studio floor. It was a process thing. For his show at Hauser & Wirth in New York in 2010, Bjorn Roth curated a show of Dieter's table-tops or *tischmatten*. At the time I came to the realization that I was interested in too many things at once. Somehow the studio floor was the only available tool to communicate those interests.

I think it's probably in the past year or so that I've been bringing bits of canvas together and sewing them quite crudely. Every completed

painting just manages to get there. I'm just using leftovers from previous works and from what's available and the practice moves forward in that way. One tutor from art school once said that the way I made work, or treated the studio, reminded her of when she was growing up in post-war Britain because then there was this idea that you had to be resourceful. I grew up as a child in a village in Colombia where there was a very similar attitude to just using what was around.

HUO: We talked about this floor, we talked about these paintings, the beginning of the paintings and how the words entered these paintings. There are the stains and recycling elements you described, and there are also these gestures and layers and cuts. But then you also use words, similar to Leon Golub.

I've worked a lot with Leon Golub, editing many of his books and curating shows with him. We did a book with Leon called *Do Paintings Bite?*. His works very often have a graffiti quality. For example, he would add words like *inevitable fate* to one painting; on another, he would add the word *nightmare*. His style of writing is similar to yours as well.



July 13th, 2012

OM: Leon Golub is an artist I encountered very early on at art school and I saw his work for the first time at the Tate probably about seven years ago. Obviously there's this idea of war, of aggression, but they're also weirdly poetic.

But I completely dismissed that hostile notion of his practice; my real admiration was for the treatment of material that I found in his paintings, a ruthless nature, and this attitude that his paintings have. For me that had more of an impact, his wanting to obliterate painting or obliterate the canvas for it to become just a useful and pragmatic surface upon which you try to communicate ideas in a very violent way. For me he was this very crude mark maker—that was one of the things that I really responded to in his works. And also that the work remains so fresh, it still has that kind of energy and I respond to that.

HUO: But your choice of words is obviously very different. With Leon Golub, it borders on agitprop. You are more concerned with the texture of the work and the words you use in your pieces are very different from his. For example, sometimes you use the word *milk*. How do you choose your words?

OM: Well, not exactly agitprop. A lot of them come from Spanish. For example, *milk* was a very important one. It was one of the very first words I did in English and the piece was about using language, or using language in a democratic way. Everybody drinks milk, rice milk or almond milk, cow's milk, etc. For example, *léchona*, is a dish in some Latin American countries made with pork and rice. So there are also connections to ideas of where I come from, and many of these ideas are associated with foods. There is a duality.

HUO: They're very often food-related.

OM: Very often food-related, but these foods are identified socially with certain segments of society. Sometimes I use the word *champagne*—something that most people in our society have

had at one point or another in their life. The more often you drink champagne the more association there is to affluence, but if you just drink champagne once a year at Christmas then it's more of a humble thing. Milk, most people drink every day, or there are words like *rice*. Again...

HUO: You use rice?

OM: Yeah, I use rice in Spanish. There's also *yoga*, for example. Yoga is one I'm using quite often at the moment.

HUO: Yoga?

OM: Yeah. This has been really interesting because I sometimes do yoga. My route into yoga was through cleaning. I used to clean a yoga studio and I became interested in yoga as a practice. There's this thing called Bikram Yoga, set up by a guru from India who came to L.A. in the '80s. He became really well known and Bikram Yoga became very popular. Then he turned it into a franchise.



This business model goes against the idea of yoga being a free for all practice, and Bikram Yoga is such an expensive activity. The reason why I go back to yoga is it's obviously from Hindu philosophy and since the late 20th century it's been transported to a Western model. Both women and men do yoga but women dominate the industry. And particularly Bikram Yoga is not about a relationship to meditation, it's more a release of physical exercise.

HUO: I find it very interesting that your experience cleaning allowed you to experience the physical space you were cleaning in a profound way. This was something that proved very important to your work. Besides the yoga studio are there any other particular spaces?

OM: I used to clean the Swiss RE building, the Gherkin.

HUO: The Norman Foster building?

OM: Yeah, I miss the views. I stopped working there a year ago now. I was working there for five years and what was really exciting about this place was that it was a community of people, an army of mostly South Americans coming in to clean the toilets and clean the floors. I was working on the 28th floor and had this incredible view of London and had the entire building to myself.

I spoke to Richard Wentworth about this and he came up with the phrase *symbolic cleaning*, because the building is essentially clean, it's just more about making sure that everything is tidied up. You spend two hours in this place and then you leave and a circular thing happens—you leave the building and then immediately there's the army of professionals that come in to work at seven-thirty or eight in the morning. And for five years I was really able to become connected to a group of Latin Americans that, like me, were making money as cleaners. It was fantastic.

HUO: Were you taking photographs of these experiences?

OM: No, I didn't. But we did take pictures of our uniforms and sometimes there was no actual cleaning to do so we just sat down and had conversations with people. The idea of cleaning became a social activity.

HUO: And that obviously inspired your performances hugely. You told me about your first painting, but what was your first performance?

OM: The first performance was a floor installation *I'd take you there, but it doesn't exist anymore* 2010-11. It existed initially as a raised floor built in my studio to facilitate my preference for working on the floor. When the floor was exhibited, through a desire for this work not to be seen as a structural sculpture, I decided to bring in a performance by three very good friends who did a reggaeton dance routine. It wasn't about repetition, so they only did the routine once, playing to the audience that came to the show at the opening. It was just this one moment.

HUO: And in the same year you did a lot of these *synthetic trash paintings*. These pieces don't have words, they have more shapes and ephemera. I have a blue one in front of me, the *synthetic trash painting, Untitled* with dirt, tape, and spray-paint on canvas, and then the *synthetic trash painting, Yellow and Red*. Can you tell me more about these paintings?

OM: Let's imagine this scenario in the studio: the idea of pollution, which is very important to the space, having a space that is polluted by dust, dirt, leftover things like tape or bits of ephemeral fabric for example. I wanted to produce work with these things in a way that was really more of an exercise. These paintings are 82 cm by 80 cm; they're small and easy-to-handle canvases. The process was about accumulating or bringing together this material onto the canvas and they became the DNA of the studio. I made a point of making these paintings, and they are called *synthetic trash paintings*, but I also see them as the DNA of the studio.



August 8th, 2012

HUO: You often refer to the studio. Where is your studio?

OM: My studio is in Dalston, and that's where I'm working now. The studio is building up layers, so it depends on the studio and how the studio is treated that dictates the kind of work that comes out of there. I can't necessarily make *synthetic trash paintings* now because there isn't enough of that rich material to make these paintings from, but that will come soon.

HUO: But it's obviously a very tactile experience. Since you're among the first generation of artists to grow up with the digital world, does the Internet play a role?

OM: The Internet does play a role but in a very pragmatic way. For example, you know Helen Marten, who's a good friend of mine, and Ed Atkins, who I've only recently met—I was just introduced to his work a few days ago—and Ed Fornieles is another one. These are artists of my generation and the idea of the digital is so central to their practice.

For me, the Internet and social networks like Facebook are practical tools for communication with my family in Colombia, and now it's so immediate. For example, I did a series of events in Colombia in 2011 and it wasn't...

HUO: Via the Internet, you did these events?

OM: Yeah. We did these events with friends in the streets. They were not connected to art at all, we were just doing these parties to celebrate Christmas and the New Year.

HUO: Real-life parties?

OM: Yes. These parties were filmed and a few months later I came back to London and my friend sent me the link to the videos through YouTube and Facebook. At that point I was removed but I was able to see the parties and the events online and my relationship to them was completely different. Now every time they do these events they send me links and I experience them now through the Internet. I download the videos and then I make posters out of them.

HUO: I wanted to ask you about your posters, because that's another thing. We spoke about your canvases, we spoke about your performances and I remember at the Nicole Klagsbrun show, which was one of the earlier shows of yours I've seen, there was also talk about window installations. This obviously has to do with posters of previous works that you printed on newspapers. When I saw your work in the Independent art fair, again a newspaper was distributed. The idea of recycling connects also to paper, a very physical thing. What's the connection to newspapers and posters? Did that also start in 2011?

OM: That started very recently. Again, they were related to events that I was doing in Colombia that found their way onto the Internet, since that's what the Internet is. With social networking I was able to see the images and bring them into the realm of my practice.

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July 24th, 2012



August 2nd, 2012

Posters, newspapers, even online pop-up ads on your screen, these are used as communication tools. They advertise concerts, or they might be used as fliers to advertise fast food restaurants, but I see them as a very immediate way to communicate with a wider audience. I should probably do an online version—that could be a future project.

For example, these videos that I've been working on, they're not necessarily artworks. I see them more as archives of what's happened, and they give an audience a way in to the work and the practice. That's the way I see the newspapers, they are also very disposable. They are something you can either take or leave and it doesn't really matter whether you throw them in the bin or frame them and hang them on the wall.

HUO: And how many have you done so far?

OM: It's hard to count. I have a friend who works at a printer, so he prints them out for free. I have literally bundles of these in the studio and sometimes I work on top of them.

HUO: Are the posters distributed?

OM: With Modern Art we did a newspaper and there was a collection of them in the newspaper. At the moment the ones that get printed are black-and-white usually. I have them in the studio and I've just been working on them.

HUO: Are they going to be displayed?

OM: They are going to be on display, and there's a wall full of posters that have been printed in black-and-white, and they have been worked on top of too. I'm also building up a series of posters with Vita Coco, a brand of coconut water. They are silk-screen printed. I want to have them in the studio for a while, so I'm still finding ways in which to use them to see how they can manifest later in exhibitions,

or how they will be distributed in performances or events that I'm involved in.

HUO: By 2012, which is the year we are recording this interview—we are recording it actually on the twenty-second day of the ninth month of the twelfth year at 6:49pm at Kensington Court in London—it's been an incredible year. You've done lots of things in 2012, including the exhibition with Stuart Shave Modern Art at Independent New York where you merged studio and gym. You told me the last time we met that it's a mix between the studio and the gym, with a mirrored wall, stacks of paintings, and sculpture. It seems that with this exhibition you brought all these things together: the painting, the installation, the performance, the stage, the mirrored wall, the participation—all your different influences. Can you tell me about this exhibition?

HUO: There's an article by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times* where she says:

At Stuart Shave Modern Art, a young London-based artist called Oscar Murillo has merged studio and gym, combining a partly mirrored wall, stacks of roughly scratched graffiti-esque paintings and a low-lying sculpture.

OM: This idea of labor and work is at the heart of my practice. In the studio you have the paintings—you can call them catalysts of motion—and then you have the sculptural elements and the platforms, which Roberta Smith called “low-lying sculptures.” For me, that show had to somehow represent, as much as possible, the entirety of my practice.

HUO: So the idea was to bring it all together, right?

OM: Yeah. It was also through a performative theme, the idea of yoga, or of doing exercise. For example, in the gym you have all this machinery, you have the treadmill, you have the weights, you have the cycling machine, you can do skipping. The gym is a hub of

physical activity and the studio is the center for my physical activity.

The idea of mark-making on these paintings, the idea of somehow just being completely physically active to the point of exhaustion, I wanted to use those ideas and say, okay, let's use the gym as a concept. The floor becomes a platform/stage where you can potentially do skipping and there are concrete balls that almost become weights. And then the mirror and the paintings have a relationship to the studio along with the idea of activity and mark-making. Then you have to the side of the mirror fluorescent Lycra-wear, which is gym wear. So there's an idea that something happened there that had these physical attributes. Through that theme I was able to bring in or expose my work in its entirety and also put everything under the same hierarchy. It wasn't about the paintings being more important or the sculptural objects being less important. It was more or less put under the same umbrella—everything is important, or not.

HUO: Now I'm wondering what we forgot, because we covered a lot of ground. Bringing these exhibitions together is almost a *gesamtkunstwerk* in itself.

We met in 2011, but 2012 is also the year we started to collaborate on projects. There was the show in Arles, which I co-curated with Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, Tom Eccles and Beatrix Ruf for Maja Hoffmann's LUMA Foundation when we invited you to the arena at the Roman amphitheater for the *To the Moon via the Beach* project. In Philippe's and Liam's concept and vision, little by little the arena was transformed from a moon landscape to a beach with tons of sand, and you did this piece, the skipping piece, *work just happens*. Can you talk about your performance and how it evolved from the original vision of Philippe and Liam?

OM: When you invited me to this project, which has been really instrumental, I wasn't really interested in having a defined idea of what I was going to execute at Arles. My thinking was more

that I have these sand sculptors transforming the arena over the period of three or four days in Arles in the middle of summer, and it was incredibly hot. I came with two or three friends and we were distributing coconut water, so in a way I was facilitating a respite during these intense summer days.

HUO: A respite?

OM: The coconut water became a kind of lifeline. These people are working, it's hot, it's exhaustive, and coconut water is a drink that your body demands.

The coconut water became an anchor that allowed me to do something: Here's Oscar Murillo, he's doing the coconut water distribution! But what that did was free me up to experiment and play during the five days that we spent in Arles.

HUO: In the arena, right?

OM: Yeah, in the arena, where I brought different tools— a skipping rope, a football, a megaphone—to potentially do something with. At the arena I wondered where to install the skipping rope so that all of us could skip. So I walk around Arles, such a small town, and I find people who are busking on the streets singing, and then I said, “Come to the Arena, we are working on something.” There was an ambulant musician who was on a trumpet and I brought him to the arena. I wired his amp to the stereo system of the arena and he begins to play the trumpet to the rhythm of the skipping.

While my friends are skipping and I'm maneuvering the skipping rope we have this guy who is orchestrating, or somehow translating through his own interpretation the rhythm of the skipping rope. For me, it was a question of just using what was around to make work in the best possible way, hence the title *work just happens*.



still from *vita coco*, 2012, color video, 32:12 min.

Toward the end of the project, I was doing yoga and I called it a midday endeavor in the arena. I kept getting scheduled to appear in the arena and it was always at 1pm. Most of the time there was nobody around so I was there by myself. The space became a space of contemplation when you enter the stage. The arena itself is a stage so it's hard to overcome that; I decided to play along with the idea of the stage.

By that time the landscape was being transformed into the moon and you had Rirkrit Tiravanija's performance taking place, *the big big bang*, which was a guy in a space suit playing the harmonica. So I very quickly built a small stage in which to do yoga and I brought in a towel, some water and an iPod wired to the speakers of the amphitheater.

HUO: Over the loudspeaker?

OM: It was a recording I made in London of a teacher conducting a Bikram Yoga class in a studio. There's an illusion of a full yoga class and then it was incredibly loud. So I decided to follow the yoga session in the middle of the amphitheater and I was completely taken

away to another environment. The yoga class lasted for an hour and a half and I was just doing yoga in this space. There weren't many people there, so it felt like I was in my own space. For me what was really instrumental, regardless of the individual works that were carried out in Arles, was to somehow respond to the space and the moment that was offered. It wasn't about repeating things on a daily basis, it was more about how I can use the tools I have to respond to that given moment. We did skipping, we played volleyball with the guys who did the sun sculpture. I built two teams of people and at the time the landscape was still a beach so we played beach volleyball.

HUO: That's before it became a moon.

OM: Yes, before it became a moon. There were all these activities that we were responding to as we were developing the project in Arles.

HUO: At the Herzog & de Meuron Ai Weiwei Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, Julia Peyton-Jones, Nicola Lees and I invited you to participate in Park Nights, which is a kind of memory architecture, a memory forum.

OM: Yeah.

HUO: And you decided to do the *Cleaners' Summer Party*.

OM: *The Cleaners' Late Summer Party with COMME des GARÇONS.*

HUO: It was totally fascinating, because there was blurring there, between art and life. You projected a film and people are dancing....

OM: I think for me that has been one of the most successful events/performances, not only because obviously the Serpentine is such an important platform, but also I think because the rate of success of the work itself was pretty high. There was, as you describe, a real

blurring of art and life, but also a real coming together of different social demographics that was really interesting.

I did a project with Comme des Garçons where I agreed with them that I would use their name for the Serpentine show in return for the commission from an ad campaign that took place a few months ago, and they gave me a credit note of £10,000. Comme des Garçons is a really great fashion line and I really admire what they do, but it's something completely separate from who I am as a person, and from the people I associate with. My family doesn't even know what Comme des Garçons is. I wanted to bring in...

HUO: To combine these two worlds?

OM: To combine these two worlds. We went to Dover Street Market with my father, my mother, my sister and some friends and they felt really uncomfortable because it was not an environment where they could really find clothes to wear, because the sizes didn't fit and it wasn't their style. It was a test, and so eventually we got these perfumes and these really simple t-shirts, and the idea was to attempt to raffle them off and we came up with dance competitions so people could win these items of clothing.

And so there were two lines there: the art crowd, expecting a performance, and the other group of people that were invited to a party. Those were the people that created the atmosphere and really engaged with what was happening, with the idea of music, with the idea of sound. We eventually got the project going—there was music being played, people having conversations, people drinking champagne, people eating pastries from a really nice French bakery here in London. All of these social codes were in action and as the evening went along there were positive signs of integration.

HUO: There was a double code: for some people it was a party, for some people it was a performance. It worked for both. It was incredibly successful and it was an encounter of different worlds,

which you brought together.

This book is going to come out for your show at the Rubells' in Miami, with our conversation. The first book you did was your recently published artist's book with onestar press in Paris. There was no text in it, there was only a collage done by you. For Miami, what's going to happen exactly? It's going to be very different because it's a different book, it's more monographic, but will it be a show? You're going to bring it out together, I guess.

OM: The paintings will play a central role, but I wanted to bring in my experience of travelling to Colombia, and what happened in Colombia is in the show through a video archive or documentation. There's a video being projected, and a wall installation with the posters that also came from Colombia a year earlier when I did an event there.

As you recall in the summer during our project in Arles, a well-developed and interesting relationship with Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno and Beatrix Ruf took place. I particularly became interested in Liam Gillick's works and in his writings, and he wrote an essay called "The Good of Work," which was a response to the question, What is the good of work? presented by Maria Lind and Simon Critchley within the context of talks delivered at the Goethe-Institut New York. I think this was in 2009, if I'm not mistaken.

I interpret "The Good of Work" as a commentary on the dynamics of operating as an artist while sustaining the essence of being human. How do you combine them when artists are travelling around the world, constantly on the go? This project at the Rubells' became exactly that—a combination of work and play. So it goes like this: I'm going to go to Miami and produce this work. It's a high production. Let's make these paintings. Let's somehow combine the experience of being there and make it work!

What I decided to do was to somehow encapsulate that and put



stills from *agua 'e lulo at my house*, 2012, color video, 15 min.

everything together. There's a juggling of the personal, and also the idea of being in this exhibition space and producing a show, which is interpreted as work. When I did the performance *The Cleaners' Late Summer Party with COMME des GARÇONS*, it started from very personal experiences that blended into the idea of work. I've always aimed for that.

But as we were discussing not so long ago, for my family and my friends this is just a party. For me these events are important because they are a way to stay connected to that personal side of life as work becomes more demanding. The idea is that I have to travel and I'm away for a month and maybe the family can come along and we can do stuff together and that can be part of it.

HUO: So the performance connects you and that leads also to the question of the connection. This is my last question for you and it's about the connection of your generation. You are not part of a movement, you're not part of a group, but how do you connect to other artists of your own generation?

OM: I mentioned Helen Marten and Ed Atkins. I could mention Ed Fornieles, as he also did a Park Nights at the Serpentine the week before mine. What really dawned on me was that with Ed, despite his performances and his projects manifesting themselves in a completely different way, there is a relationship to the social sphere. In fact we are thinking of collaborating where we will combine the idea of social networking to potentially work on a coming-of-age party, for example.

But I think the connection really lies on knowledge. Helen Marten and Ed Atkins probably have a lot more in common with each other, but I think our practices are more about the fact that we somehow feel that everything is available. There's nothing off-limits, there's nothing off the table. For example, Helen Marten has this incredible ability to grab and to sample and to bring in materials that you can identify as things of previous generations, but she somehow pulls them into her



practice and makes them her own. I made these paintings that you could say are from the 1950s. I think that's how I would associate myself with the other artists who are working today—just thinking that we have everything available and we can just use what's there and around, but not feel concerned by it.

HUO: That's such a great conclusion, many, many thanks.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is Co-Director of the Serpentine Gallery in London. Prior to this, he was curator at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris from 2000 to 2006, as well as curator at museum in progress, Vienna, from 1993 to 2000. Obrist has co-curated over 250 exhibitions since his first exhibition including *The Kitchen Show (World Soup)* in 1991; *Cities on the Move*, 1997; *1st Berlin Biennale*, 1998; *Laboratorium*, 1999; *Utopia Station*, 2003; *1st & 2nd Moscow Biennale*, 2005 and 2007; *Lyon Biennale*, 2007; and *Indian Highway*, 2008-2012.

Obrist is the editor of a series of conversation books published by Walther Koenig. He has also edited the writings of Gerhard Richter, Gilbert and George and Louise Bourgeois. He has contributed to over 200 book projects, his recent publications include *A Brief History of Curating*, *dontstopdontstopdontstopdontstop*, *The future will be...* with M/M (Paris), *Interview with Hans-Peter Feldmann*, and *Ai Weiwei Speaks*, along with two volumes of his selected interviews (*Interviews: Vol. 1 & 2*). *The Marathon* series of public events was conceived by Hans Ulrich Obrist in Stuttgart in 2005. The first in the Serpentine series, the *Interview Marathon* in 2006, involved interviews with leading figures in contemporary culture over 24 hours, conducted by Obrist and architect Rem Koolhaas. This was followed by the *Experiment Marathon*, conceived by Obrist and artist Olafur Eliasson in 2007, the *Manifesto Marathon* in 2008, the *Poetry Marathon* in 2009, *Map Marathon* in 2010, and the *Garden Marathon* in 2011.

In 2009, Obrist was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). In March 2011, he was awarded the Bard College Award for Curatorial Excellence.

