



Hans Ulrich Obrist listens to the heartbeat of a stranger in a performance of Yan Jun's *The Stethoscope* (left). Artist Ai Weiwei (below, front right) boycotted last year's Olympics because he believes the event turned Beijing into a police state. Photo: Paul Cooper



Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist delves to the heart of the Chinese art scene in a 14-hour marathon discussion, writes **Kristina Perez**

Batteries charged

It's midnight on December 31 and the amplified sound of human heartbeats reverberate throughout Beijing's Vitamin Creative Space, ushering in the new year. Among the packed crowd at this live performance by composer Yan Jun are prominent mainland artists and, at the centre, Hans Ulrich Obrist.

"We don't stop," the Swiss curator says, referring to those attending the event. "When the world goes on holiday, we don't."

Yan's piece, *The Stethoscope*, involves 15 audience members taking turns listening to the heartbeat of a stranger. The intimate experiment is intended to foster a personal relationship between participants quickly.

But Obrist is not among strangers tonight. Since the 1990s, he has curated some of the most important international shows on Chinese contemporary art. That may also explain why the man is able to command a rock star-like lineup for his latest project, including artists Ai Weiwei, Cao Fei and Wang Jianwei, as well as filmmaker Jia Zhangke and architect Ma Yansong.

"Battery City: A Post-Olympic Beijing Mini-Marathon" is a 14-hour series of interviews and group discussions that attempt "to map the most pressing concerns of the minds of Chinese artists, architects, writers and intellectuals at this moment, and to regenerate energy for future development within the Chinese context".

A book based on the "conversation" as well as a previous series of dialogues between the curators and Chinese artists will be published by Vitamin Creative Space later this year.

Obrist is filled with what he calls the "New Beijing Optimism".

He says: "It felt interesting now, six months after the Olympics, to do something and to see where Beijing really stands... talking to artists... a lot of artists are really optimistic."

Despite the recent dip in the art market, he doesn't feel western art collectors and curators are about to lose interest in Chinese art following the Olympics – quite the contrary.

"Twentieth-century art history was still very much western art history and although New York stole the avant-garde from Paris and it shifted from the Paris avant-garde to Jackson Pollock; it was very much a western avant-garde," says Obrist.

"But it's only very recently that there has been a focus on eastern art... it is early and it will be much, much more interesting [to see] what's happening in China."

The effect of the internet on artistic practice and on the daily lives of Chinese people is a hot topic, particularly the role of blogs, which Obrist refers to as "social sculptures".

According to Ai, the internet has made "our time the best time ever in human history".

"We have more access to

information in order to communicate with each other better, although the information may be incomplete," says the artist. "Compared to the past, the individual has gained maximum freedom."

Ai, who helped conceive the Bird's Nest Stadium, made headlines last year when he openly criticised and boycotted the Beijing Olympics because he believed the event had turned the capital into a police state.

Ai says he doesn't know why his website hasn't been shut down because of his outspoken political views. "My blog is not that different from other people's blogs," he says. "What I do is constantly care about what's going on in society and especially freedom of expression and the way we express ourselves. Therefore, I've become a political figure."

But some artists say the turbulent economic times and consequent apprehension can also be seen as tools of reinvention.

"Nowadays, I think the interesting part of science, politics and economics is the uncertain part," says conceptual artist Wang. "And this kind of experience is very important to contemporary art: how to use this uncertain experience to create. Also the uncertainty leads to how you display art or how you express art."

Obrist says: "It's not necessarily a bad moment for art, because it allows art to reinvent itself."

The other recurring question during the marathon dialogue is whether the future for the mainland lies in the city or the countryside. The general consensus is that metropolis, despite all its problems, still holds the key to the future.

Architect Ma Yansong says urbanisation in Beijing is still in its infancy.

"Of course, I am optimistic, when I look at Beijing as a city, an individual's existence only actually

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Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator

occupies my own part of history. But maybe sometimes when you spend a lot of time learning from history you don't have time to identify yourself," says Ma. "So I think linking the past and the future is now very important."

The importance of memory, in relation not only to Beijing but to the mainland's history as a whole, its creation and presentation, is an urgent matter, says Jia. "Film is the best way to preserve the vanished details [of memory]," he says.

Obrist first conceived of the marathon format for a 2005 arts festival in Stuttgart when he decided to stage an interview project for 24

hours and create a talk-show-like atmosphere.

"I've always been interested in exploring unusual curatorial platforms and doing exhibitions in unusual places," he says.

"I thought it could be interesting to apply my curatorial experience, which has been mostly in museums and exhibitions, to talks and conferences."

Most symposia follow a rigid format lacking in spontaneity, but Obrist says: "Exhibition history throughout the 20th century invented new temporalities, new display features, new rules of the game."

Obrist's introduction to the Chinese avant-garde came early in his career, in Paris in the early 1990s, when he was a neighbour of artist Huang Yong Ping. The 41-year-old grew up in the medieval monastery town of St Gall, which he says shaped his view of cities as repositories of knowledge.

Through his marathons, Obrist seeks to mine that knowledge to create a portrait of a city through its artists. The concept also translates into the metaphor of a battery for Beijing, he says.

"It's to do with energy and, as always, there's an immense energy potential in this city," Obrist says.

"I've just always had this feeling talking to artists here that there is this immense battery... it's not completely untapped, but there is a lot of potential. So it is a long-lasting battery."