

[Sign into the Guardian using your Facebook account](#)

theguardian

Do It: the art of instructions

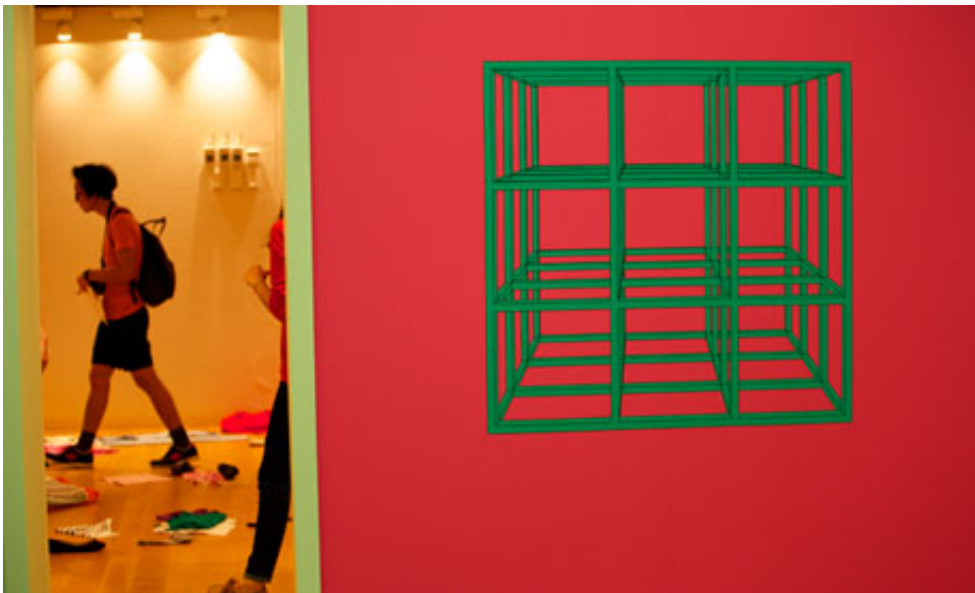
At Do It, visitors obey instructions left by artists from Ai Weiwei to Louise Bourgeois. Adrian Searle wrestles with a zip-up poncho and recreates his bedroom floor – but will he smile at a stranger?

• **The Space will be live-streaming eight hours of performances, interviews and archive from Do It on Friday 12 July from 10:30am BST. Visit guardian.co.uk/art to watch**



Adrian Searle

The Guardian, Monday 8 July 2013



The 20-year project ... a Michael Craig-Martin picture by the entrance to John Chamberlain's hardwood room of a certain size. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

So many things to do. Start a rumour; write a poem using toothpicks to form the letters; invite a stranger into your home for breakfast; use a bicycle seat to squeeze

lemons; make Thai curry sauce; repent. There's always time to repent. The list is endless, as is the [Do It project](#), from which the above all come. Do It is an ever-growing compendium of commands and instructions now presented in a large, lively and thoughtful show at [Manchester Art Gallery](#). These commands, by artists and for anyone to follow, invite us to join in the process of making, performing or completing an artist's work. Exhibitions of Do It are great opportunities to have fun – and make an absolute spectacle of yourself.

Do It 2013

 Manchester Art Gallery

 Until 21 July

[Venue website](#)

Since 2007, the [Manchester international festival](#) has established a focus on live art, not just as spectacle, but also in terms of participation. It has, even more crucially, encouraged crossovers. Peter Sellars's production of Shostakovich's 1974 Suite on Verses from [Michelangelo's Sonnets](#) (and a Bach cantata) featured the bass-baritone [Eric Owens](#), who spent the performance dressed as a janitor mopping the stage, when he wasn't simulating a heart attack. Wunderkind organist [Cameron Carpenter](#) was also involved, and the result, dynamic and intensely visual, was as much a piece of theatre as it was a concert. You could even say it was site-specific. I could have lived without the arty, back-projected images of the semi-naked and slightly tortured Owens though – a nod too far to Michelangelo. Not even a director of Sellars's calibre always gets it right.

That work could almost exist as a Do It: watch a janitor mop the stage for a couple of hours as he sings a selection of Michelangelo's sonnets, in Russian, in a derelict Methodist chapel. Who'd have thought it? But meanwhile, back at Do It, I am wrestling with a zip-up poncho that has been created in the form of a Möbius strip. I'll try anything once. It's a homage to Lygia Clark, the great Brazilian exponent of interactive art, and as I get myself in a bind with it a gaggle of children look on and laughed. I begin to wonder how far I am prepared to go with this audience-participation lark.



Yoko Ono's Wish

Piece. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

Exhibitions of Do It have been on the road for 20 years now. Born out of a conversation in a Paris cafe in 1993, it's the brainchild of French artists Christian Boltanski and Bertrand Lavier, as well as Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, one of the artistic advisers of MIF. Do It has had more than 60 incarnations: as exhibitions, archive, online video clips, seminars and peripatetic events on every continent. And all manner of artists – from Richard Hamilton to David Lynch, Elaine Sturtevant to Sarah Lucas – have offered instructions, as have critics, scientists and philosophers, not to mention choreographer William Forsythe and novelist Douglas Coupland. Do It is both populist and esoteric. Anyone can join in, and the instructions range from the daft to the dangerous, the unfulfillable to the apparently meaningless.

Ai Weiwei offers instructions on how to disable an overhead CCTV surveillance camera, using a can of spray paint (to squirt over the lens) attached to a long stick, operated using a corkscrew and a length of wire. He gives full instructions about how to build the device. Every home should have one! An unsmiling uniformed guard stands in front of a door. You can only enter if you are humming a tune as you approach. This is Adrian Piper's 2012 Humming Room and, once inside the empty room, there's nothing to do but carry on humming. Louise Bourgeois instructs us to stop and smile at a stranger when we are out walking, though I am unsure how much cheery bonhomie Bourgeois ever indulged in herself. Tracey Emin asks us, following Bourgeois, to hand a stranger a note that shrieks, among other things: "You Don't Give Me The Love That I Need." That'll make them run.

Yoko Ono asks us to write down our wishes on little tags and attach them to her Wish Tree. Between the little wishes for world peace and someone hoping their mum's leg might get better, there was a heartfelt wish that "curators would stop recycling the

Wishing Tree – it's been done to death". I heartily agree. I rather hoped the vulture that had been allowed to fly in the gallery (a Do It by Colombian performance artist Maria José Arjona, made in homage to her compatriot María Teresa Hincapié, who turned her life into a continual performance) had landed on the tree and done some bad karma vulture wish-thing, but it didn't.

A whole room is devoted to artists whose proposals have outlived them. US artist John Chamberlain stipulated a room of a certain size (with hardwood floor) and clothing, bedding, rope and small lace doilies. You can do what you want with them. Children played, I threw a few clothes around, to emulate my bedroom floor, and veteran conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner arranged Chamberlain's stuff according to some system all his own, using the doilies to spell out SOS in Morse code. I know how he felt.

Do It is an evolving repertoire of works by an ever-expanding roster of artists, filling several galleries of its own and insinuating instructions amid the permanent collection. At the very least, we can take away the ideas of Do It in our heads, though curmudgeonly types might want to follow the late American painter Leon Golub's typically exclamatory instruction: "Don't Do It! Refuse!" But Do It does bring people together, and gets them talking and engaging.

The ramifications of various pieces spread beyond the confines of the gallery. Kids in the lobby were making a huge arte-povera papier-mache ball of newspapers, to be used as an accompaniment to a stroll in the street, according to an instruction by Michelangelo Pistoletto. It's a good way of using up old copies of the Guardian. And remember, the more you read, the bigger the balls.



Ai Weiwei's

demonstration of how to disable a security camera.

It took some kind of gall, too, to perform Chicago artist Theaster Gates's *How to Catch the Holy Ghost or Get Arrested in a Shopping Mall*, in Manchester's Arndale Centre, where a young man intoned the phrase "Our souls refreshed", over and over. My soul wasn't. If you are going to perform anything, your heart and soul have to be in it, refreshed or not.

I overslept the dawn commencement of Indian artist Nikhil Chopra's 65-hour continuous performance *Coal on Cotton*, in a specially constructed marquee on the empty, open site of the Whitworth Gallery's new extension. On both my visits, about 18 hours apart, Chopra, his face whitened and wearing the Lancashire mill-worker's garb of big boots and cloth cap, was drawing on the wall of the tent, where he was living, eating and sleeping over the weekend.

The charcoal drawing, based on a photograph of Manchester in the 1960s, hadn't much progressed beyond a view of a bucolic, tree-clad hinterland, a city in the distance and a few billowing smokestack clouds that had begun to climb the roof of the cotton tent. A soporific audience sat about, snapping the artist while he worked. The tent, and Chopra's clothes, came from the last of the Manchester cotton mills and from Mumbai. Rather than using coal to draw with, the fuel of the Industrial Revolution, Chopra had settled for art-store willow charcoal, which seemed a bit of a cheat. The drawing, I suppose, was meant to invoke a kind of reversal of the colonialist picturesque. None of it amounted to much, in my view. Maybe I missed something. One early-bird visitor found the artist eating a banana at dawn, and it was quite possible to watch him sleeping, should you wander in at dead of night.

Next weekend the ubiquitous Tino Sehgal will be performing his wonderful *This Variation*, the electrifying piece he devised for Documenta in Germany last year. In the earlier version, there was dancing in the dark, a cappella singing (from the gospels to *Good Vibrations*), and an enveloping, disorientating atmosphere. At Documenta, I could barely drag myself away. His new, much enlarged version will be rechoreographed and staged in Mayfield Depot, the same echoing, abandoned space behind Manchester Piccadilly station used by Adam Curtis and Massive Attack this weekend to similarly devastating effect.

You never know if you are witness or participant, spectator or performer in Sehgal's works. We're all actors, just as we are in *Do It*. Sehgal was in the last festival here, and it is the second outing for several other artists and performers. It is time for younger blood, fresh instructions.

• **The Space will be live-streaming eight hours of performances, interviews**

and archive from **Do It on Friday 12 July from 10:30am BST. Visit guardian.co.uk/art to watch**



Get the Guardian's daily US email

Our editors' picks for the day's top news and commentary delivered to your inbox each morning.

[Sign up for the daily email](#)

More from the Guardian

[What's this?](#)



Massive Attack v Adam Curtis – review
07 Jul 2013



Charles Saatchi: Nigella Lawson and I to divorce
07 Jul 2013



Is this the most irritating ad ever?
09 Jul 2013



Cleveland kidnap victims DeJesus, Berry and Knight speak for first time
09 Jul 2013

More from around the web

[What's this?](#)



How To Design Visual Content
(Uberflip Blog)



Plastic Surgery Disasters: Lil Kim, Meg Ryan & More
(Hollyscoop)



Sports Illustrated's 50 Greatest Swimsuit Models (10-1)
(Sports Illustrated)



6 Biggest Faux Pas in Kitchen Design
(Cultivate)

Ads by Google

Man Cheats Credit Score

1 simple trick & my credit score jumped 217 pts. Banks hate this!

www.thecreditsolutionprogram.com

Navy Ship Prints

Ships, Submarines & Planes Navy, Coast Guard, Marines & More

www.veramarnavalproducts.com

Christ 4 Responders

A Christian Online Community for Police, Fire, EMS etc.

www.christ4responders.org

© 2013 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.