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Just do it

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IN 1919 Marcel Duchamp sent a letter from Argentina to his sister in Paris, instructing her to hang a geometry textbook from her apartment balcony so that it could be exposed to the elements and "get the facts of life". Mr Duchamp's sister painted the results. The work became "Readymade Malheureux" (Unhappy Readymade), one of the first instances of what is now known as instruction art.

Art created from instructions—or the idea that instructions can be a part of the process—has fascinated Hans Ulrich Obrist, a curator, for decades. Instruction art offers the possibility that art can live on through instructions the way that music lives on through compositions. This is the idea behind "Do It", a concept Mr Obrist came up with, which calls on artists to create instructions for making art. Twelve artists participated in his inaugural "Do It" exhibition at the Kunsthalle Ritter in Austria in 1994. Since then shows of "Do It" art have taken place in cities

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around the world. More than 250 artists have contributed instructions to the project, including Louise Bourgeois, Mike Kelley, Damien Hirst, Anna Halprin, Marina Abramovic and others.

To mark the 20th anniversary of “Do It”, Independent Curators International and D.A.P. have released “Do It: The Compendium”, a thick, orange, 448-page manual, like an art recipe book, filled with artists’ instructions and essays. Events celebrating “Do It” will be held over the course of the year around the globe, including at the Manchester International Festival from July 4th to the 21st.

Meant to be executed at a gallery, museum, at home—anywhere really—some of the instructions are direct and easy to realise. Ugo Rondinone tells the reader to sit down, “light a cigarette” or not, and look out the window or at a wall until something happens. Ai Weiwei offers directions on how to construct a device that can be used to spray paint on CCTV surveillance cameras. Tracey Emin instructs readers to place 27 bottles of different sizes and colours on a table and then wrap them in a reel of red cotton, “like a strange web that joins them all together”.

Other instructions are more bizarre and conceptual. Maurizio Cattelan, a practical joker in the art world, instructs curators to wear only underwear and shoes to a show’s opening. Ms Abramovic offers a recipe for mixing breast milk with “milk of the sperm” to drink during earthquake nights. Nicholas Hlobo tells an ambitious curator to “install a work of mine on the moon”.

“Most of [the instructions] can in theory be realised,” says Mr Obrist, though he concedes that “some are unlikely to be realised.”

At the Manchester festival, visitors will be able to create their own art based on artists’ instructions, and artists will pay tribute to dead participants. “Tracey Emin is going to interpret Louise Bourgeois’s ‘Smile’,” says Mr Obrist. “Sarah Lucas is going to reinterpret the late Franz West’s broom sculpture. I’m going to have John Baldessari reinterpret his friend Sol Lewitt’s instructions.”

For “Do It”, the possibilities are infinite. As the concept gets older, Mr Obrist adds more artists to the mix. “Each time I see an artist who works with instructions I would invite them,” he says. He envisions an interactive website where visitors can contribute comments and photographs of their interpretations of “Do It” instructions.

“It would be very nice for the first time in art history to [have] an exhibition that never stops,” says Mr Obrist.

Do It: The Compendium. By Hans Ulrich Obrist. Independent Curators International/D.A.P.; 448 pages; \$35

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