

## Do It: The art of command

For two decades, maverick art movement Do It has been issuing surreal, witty instructions. As a new exhibition opens at MIF, Sarah Lucas and Hans-Ulrich Obrist explain its demands



**Skye Sherwin**

Do It 2013 will be at the Manchester Art Gallery, 5-21 July. Photograph: Michael Thomas Jones

The chef cooking up Thai chilli paste outside Manchester Art Gallery isn't trying to launch a street food pop-up; bottles of his wares are freely available inside the art space. Here, you might also find yourself making wall drawings by dancing with a giant piece of chalk, humming on demand, climbing ladders, hunting down Russians and four-leaf clovers, or sticking sculpture between your legs.

This is all part of Do It, an exhibition that enthusiastically embraces any idea whatsoever, with a disarmingly simple premise at its core: artists' written instructions. Born from a conversation between über-curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist and artists Bertrand Lavier and Christian Boltanski in 1993, the past 20 years have seen Do It staged the world over, with everyone from Damien Hirst to David Lynch penning contributions. Many of these artists' works are boiled down to surreally matter-of-fact, step-by-step recipes. "They can be interpreted any way, like scores in music," Obrist explains, flanked by YBA star and one of Do It 2013's key collaborators, Sarah Lucas, who adds: "It's an umbrella that can cover anything."

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This year Obrist is testing the concept with the help of Lucas, Tracey Emin, Ólafur Elíasson and other luminaries of contemporary art. In addition to the Active Room, where visitors can get busy with instructions, and Archive and Film Rooms documenting it all, Obrist has created a Home Room, where instructions for artworks by members of the Do It tribe who have lately passed away are realised by kindred spirits.

Lucas has made a work according to dictates from her friend, the late Austrian artist Franz West. "Though he's technically gone, it was nice to spend a moment with him this way," she reflects. Best known for his giant, cartoonish, bright pink public sculptures resembling Mr Blobby's naughty bits, West's appreciation for all things knobby is one that Brit Art's former bad girl surely shares. Her own work has evolved from straight-talking takes on toilet-door sexism that said tough, funny, moving things about desire and the human condition with buckets and melons, to formally ambitious psychosexual sculptures using earthy everyday finds like stuffed tights.

Yet as Lucas points out, it was the way that West related to people that really got her. "He liked his art the same way he liked music: live." It's key to the Paßstück or "adaptive" she's made, one of West's small sculptures where ordinary objects (in this case a broom) are coated in plaster, which gallery-goers are then invited to interact with, using it as a prop or fitting it under limbs, with reliably awkward results.

For Lucas, Do It provides artists with "a place to start". Its DIY attitude was ever-present in early 90s art, when YBAs were self-organising shows in old warehouses and she and Tracey Emin opened The Shop, selling their work from an old doctor's surgery in Bethnal Green. "I will never forget visiting Sarah's shop, which was an amazing epiphany," confirms Obrist. "You could see other possibilities, how one could do it."

Other homages include Emin's bottles and red cotton spider web in memory of Louise Bourgeois; Wade Guyton following instructions from Pop Art granddaddy Richard Hamilton; and Turner nominee Tino Sehgal enacting those of his hero Félix González Torres.

These tangible works are only a small part of the Do It canon, of course. Whether hung on the wall, collected in a new tome or printed on takeaway cards created by Mancunian graphic design legend Peter Saville, the written instructions know no bounds.

These include some great "how tos" such as Theaster Gates's "How to catch the Holy Ghost in a shopping mall", and Douglas Gordon's "Three steps to heaven" (instructing the participant to repeatedly neck champagne and tequila in order to reach nirvana). Many upend social codes ("Smile at a stranger", commanded Louise Bourgeois) and there are plenty of subversive calls to arms, like Ai Weiwei's guide to spray-painting the lens of a CCTV surveillance camera. "The artist Leon Golub created a movement against Do It. He said 'Refuse! Don't do!'" enthuses Obrist.

Though Do It is the first group show dedicated to artists' instructions, the curator is keen to highlight its precedents, not least Yoko Ono's book Grapefruit. Yet it's a concept that is constantly shifting and adapting itself to the times. "In 1995 [seminal video artist] Nam June Paik was the first to use the internet. His instruction sent someone to a cybercafe." Obrist <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/may/24/do-it-sarah-lucas-hans-ulrich-obrist>

laughs at the quaintness of the scenario. Today, the downloadable version means that Do It knows no boundaries: "It can happen anywhere. Some people might Do It and we don't even know."

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