

ArtReview



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Other People and Their Ideas

No 11

Simon Castets

Interview by Tom Eccles



Simon Castets is a curator based in New York, who, together with Hans Ulrich Obrist, founded the long-term research project 89plus at the beginning of the year. 89plus also formed the basis of this year's talks marathon at the Serpentine Galleries in London, which brought together participants from the fields of art, architecture, music, activism, science, technology, literature and theory in an attempt to understand a series of questions and propositions about the generation born in or after 1989. Castets himself was born before 1989, although not by much. In September he was appointed director and curator of the not-for-profit Swiss Institute in New York.

ARTREVIEW *You recently formed an ongoing investigation into what might be described as the next generation: those born in or after 1989, a year in which you note that the Internet became widely available, the Berlin Wall came down and the first GPS satellite was launched into orbit. The project asks a series of questions: 'Can the potential of emerging technologies lead to a truly global dialogue that is not homogeneous but acknowledges and fosters difference? What options are available to the generations born after the Cold War, growing up through the crisis of financial capitalism? How can we understand new and networked forms of collectivity as examples of new social, economic, political and aesthetic forms? What are the new forms of activism and protest? Has access to the Internet changed political action? What is the relationship between individual leadership and the group in the age of nonhierarchical, 'horizontal' practice? Who is responsible for the future?'*

Can I ask why you think this generation is any different from any other?

SIMON CASTETS We don't know that the generation in itself is different – we are way too early in a decades-long project to make broad statements. But we do think that the changes brought by the technological innovations and geopolitical changes you mentioned amount to a radical paradigm shift. Hence our interest in investigating the work made by people who are born into this new state of affairs. We think it is interesting to consider those effects from a generational perspective, as having such a constraint does not only focus the research but also forces you to recognise the limits of such a framework: it is a generation of over three billion people; a homogenising view wouldn't be apropos.

AR *Can you explain the structure of 89plus? The scope of the inquiry seems rather overwhelming, if not a little broad.*

SC Even though the constraint can seem narrow, the inquiry does indeed yield an incredibly vast array of possibilities. It has to do with the fact that this generation is unevenly distributed and we don't realise its importance from here: only about 30 percent of the population of Europe and the US is born in 1989 or after, while in most African and many Asian countries the proportion rises above 60 percent. This is reflected in the very structure of 89plus: it is a research platform hosted online on 89plus.com, and can therefore be added to by virtually anyone in the world. Thanks to this open call, we receive information daily from people working in Indonesia, India or Nigeria, and it is indeed overwhelming, but we embrace this aspect. As we are working without a deadline, or more precisely, with a series of deadlines, we welcome this constant flow of submissions and are in

conversation with an incrementally large group of people, which is somewhat contrary to the logic of curating.

AR *You are currently in the phase of an open call to artists, writers, architects and other so-called creatives, but which also includes scientists and technologists, the only rule being that participants must be from the '89 plus' generation. There are no restrictions, other than the file size, as to what people can submit. While the project is only the beginning, are there any patterns emerging from what you've received so far?*

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and afterwards have often
had an early exposure to
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your perspective**

SC Even though, as you said, the project is only beginning, we see some recurring aspects in people's interests. Poetry is one of them, and this is why the 89plus Marathon at the Serpentine Galleries during this year's Frieze London included a poetry section, which was a highlight. There were readings by – in order of appearance – Sophie Collins, Harry Burke (who was a key adviser in selecting the participants for that section), Luna Miguel, Gabby Bess, Rachael Allen and Crispin Best. Although it wasn't poetry per se, Ho Rui An's participation was also part of that realm. And there was also a large group of poets participating through the marathon's online platform.

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AR *I heard there were quite a lot of poems about sex. The Canadian writer and novelist Douglas Coupland was certainly an inspiration for many at the Serpentine Marathon, drawing an enthusiastic response on your concurrent live-stream blog. Coupland was born in 1961 and famously popularised the label 'Generation x' in the title of his 1991 novel. The 89plus generation is*

facing page photo: Bruno Zhu

neither y nor z. Is growing up in a fully digital world what really defines them?

SC Douglas Coupland coined the term 'Diamond Generation' for people born in 1989 and after: it is about sharpness (immediate access to knowledge) and transparency (a different relationship to privacy).

The fact that there was lots of talking about sex in the poetry section of the 89plus Marathon at the Serpentine Galleries might not be a coincidence. People born in 1989 and afterwards have often had an early exposure to Internet porn. If that is your first representation of sexuality, it is most likely to influence your perspective.

This generation has sometimes been characterised as 'digital natives', but this appellation doesn't account for the fact that, according to a recent study from the Georgia Institute of Technology and International Telecommunication Union (ITU), on a global scale, less than a third of this generation has been active online for at least five years. Timor-Leste is both the country with the highest proportion of people in its population born in 1989 and after (69 percent according to the UN Population Division) and the country with the lowest proportion of digital natives (less than one percent). What this shows is that if you look further than the richest countries, we are far from living in a fully digital world. What should be accounted for, though, is that the effects of the Internet are not experienced only firsthand by young computer users but also indirectly in everyday life situations and exposure to foreign cultural influences virtually anywhere in the world. Also, the proportion of digital natives globally is increasing extremely rapidly. The ITU report indicates that it will double by 2017. And some figures are surprising: there are more digital natives in Malaysia (fourth in the world proportionally) than in Spain.

AR *My wife characterises the 'millennials' as lazy, self-absorbed and overentitled. How would you describe them?*

SC This characterisation could easily apply to lots of Gen-Xers, and to other age brackets. It might just be that this is simply most destabilising when people are teenagers. Actually this is a good occasion to emphasise a very important aspect of the 89plus project: it is *not* about youth. It is a long-term project investigating the interests of a generation that happens to be exclusively young today, but in ten or 15 years from now hopefully we'll still be talking with some of the same people, who will be in their late thirties then. The scope becomes wider as we progress.

AR *After the suicide of the American Internet activist Aaron Swartz earlier this year and the revelations of*

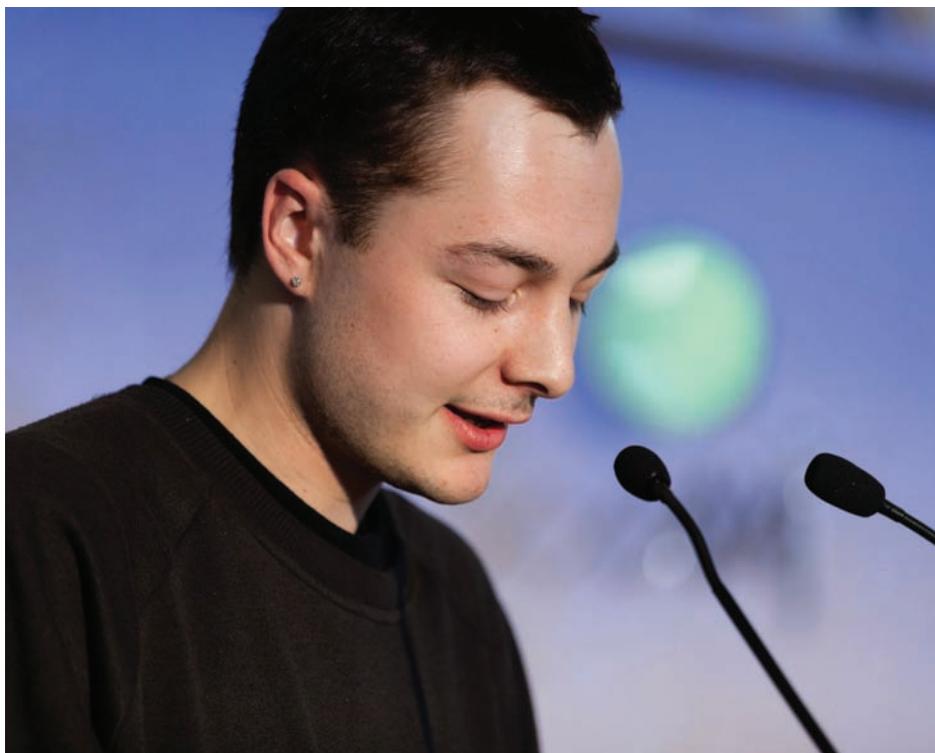
NSA spying by Edward Snowden (not to mention the destruction of this young idealist's life), don't you think the utopian bubble built around the Internet and its possibilities may have burst for many young people? One would certainly hope so. Mark Zuckerberg still seems to think that connectivity is a liberation, while Bill Gates has argued recently that information technology doesn't even rank in the top five of the problem-solving devices on our planet today. As you reach out globally (and you carefully note the disparity in global access to computers), what do you think are the differences between how, say, my generation ('64plus') and the next generation will address the political realities of their time?

sc The examples you mentioned I think speak volumes about the transformative potential of the Internet on political action. As with all major innovations, it is presented as both the solution to everything and the worst thing that has ever happened to mankind. Reality is somewhere in between, and the 89plus Marathon explored different aspects of this, from James Darling's plea for the UK Government Digital Strategy to Jake Davis, who is famous as the former LulzSec/Anonymous hacker 'Topiary'. Jake was legally banned from the Internet for two years and has served time in Feltham Young Offenders Institution for his involvement in computer misuse, defined as a 'tier 1 threat to British national security'. Jake had to cancel his presentation at the very last minute, as he expressed concerns about speaking in public after a long legal battle. Another example of a hyperconnected teenager becoming a 'threat to national security': Ou Ning introduced us to Joshua Wong, who at age fifteen used social media to organise mass protests against the adoption of Beijing-dictated Chinese civic education into the Hong Kong public school curriculum. Interestingly, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests are omitted from the Chinese government's version of history.

AR I'm actually interested in the impact of technology on a generation's relationship to authority and politics, which seems to be changing – certainly in

modes of resistance. Do you consider the Occupy movement a failure?

sc Again I think we can't have a general perspective on this. It makes me think in a way of your *The Human Snapshot* project [generated by an international conference organised by the LUMA Foundation in Arles, France, of which the interviewer is a member of the Core Group of advisers (and which also supports 89plus), and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard, of which Tom Eccles is executive director], which looks at claims of universality and human rights, and how you highlighted the shortcomings of the *Family of Man*-type approach. The Occupy movement has been particularly active in Spain, where we will be conducting an 89plus 'professional meeting' with ARCO art fair in Madrid in February. This will be



the occasion to also do some focused research in the country. We are particularly interested in this project, as within the Spanish population born in 1989 and after, 50 percent of people are unemployed. It is disastrous. But it may also lead to unexpected developments.

AR You have recently been named as the new director of Swiss Institute in New York. At twenty-nine, and being French, that's a remarkable achievement. It's a rather oddball institution, being unabashedly not Swiss and yet decidedly Swiss at the same time – being comfortably international, sophisticated and self-assured, with a fair bout of humour. Or is that a gross mischaracterisation?

Curator Harry Burke speaking
at the 89plus Marathon, Serpentine Galleries, London.
Photo: Lewis Ronald and Pierrick Mouton

sc Definitely not a mischaracterisation. It is a unique institution, and my predecessors have brilliantly managed to establish its key position in New York. So the achievement is rather something I will be working towards: it's a great honour and a challenge to now start a new page of its history. The best is yet to come! There is great momentum: the annual benefit has been incredibly successful, Daniel Baumann is joining us as a trustee and we are soon opening the first solo exhibition in the US of Allyson Vieira, a new site-specific iteration of her splendid Kunsthalle Basel show. More soon. Fasten your seatbelt.

AR In what is undoubtedly a 'crowded market', how do you think an organisation like Swiss Institute can distinguish itself? What do you think is lacking right now in New York?

sc It distinguishes itself through its mandate, inscribed in its name, and the way it fulfils it. As you said, 'decidedly Swiss' yet 'comfortably international'. I can't think of any other institution with that approach to cultural diplomacy. It probably has to do with the fact that, within its population of roughly eight million (almost the same as that of London), Switzerland holds the world's highest proportion of artists per square metre.

AR We all complain about the art market. Is it really

as pernicious and malevolent as many claim?

sc Only if one lets it dictate choices in areas where it shouldn't. It is a necessary evil that often allows the not-for-profit sector to think bigger. Probably more convergences than conflicts of interests. It is evolving very fast, so it's everybody's role to make sure the boundaries are respected.

AR What role do you see for not-for-profit organisations?

sc They are bastions of creative thinking. Their voices can carry much further than their small infrastructures. They have a great responsibility. They are a public service. They work in the long term with elegant flexibility and unflinching determination.