

The Museum of Everything: A World of Untrained, Undiscovered Artists

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A few minutes of browsing the website of [The Museum of Everything](#) was enough to make me leave my flat and hightail it to rue du Bac in record speed, just to answer that lingering question: *Just what the hell is going on over here?*



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And the answer to that question is: **a lot**. A lot is going on here, and it's going to blow your *mind*.

Courtyard of The Museum of Everything

It's called *art brut*, raw art, outsider art: terms that describe art created by those who stand outside of the circle of the traditional art scene – the untrained, the unknown. French artist [Jean Dubuffet](#) was fascinated by the authentic impulse-driven works of individuals such as insane-asylum inmates or children. Today, the meaning of 'outsider art' is not limited to the mentally ill. It is any art that stems from extreme mental states, that produces mind-boggling and manic representations, that pulls us into another world.

This is exactly what British filmmaker and museum founder James Brett wants to share with The Museum of Everything. Brett's fascination with these artists "living outside modern society" started with the figurative American folk art carvings he'd picked up while traveling across the southern states of the US; something in the artists' lack of ambition to be known and the intimacy of their works attracted Brett. The desire to exhibit his collection was due to the interest of other people, mostly with a background in art. There are around 600 works on display, from undiscovered and untrained artists of

the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Their works are introduced in short texts by some big names in the art world, including [Maurizio Cattelan](#) and [Paul Chan](#). These artworks debuted in London in 2009, then in Italy in 2010, in Russia early this year, and now in Paris.



The exhibit is held in an abandoned Catholic school building complex, along rue du Bac in the St. Germain area

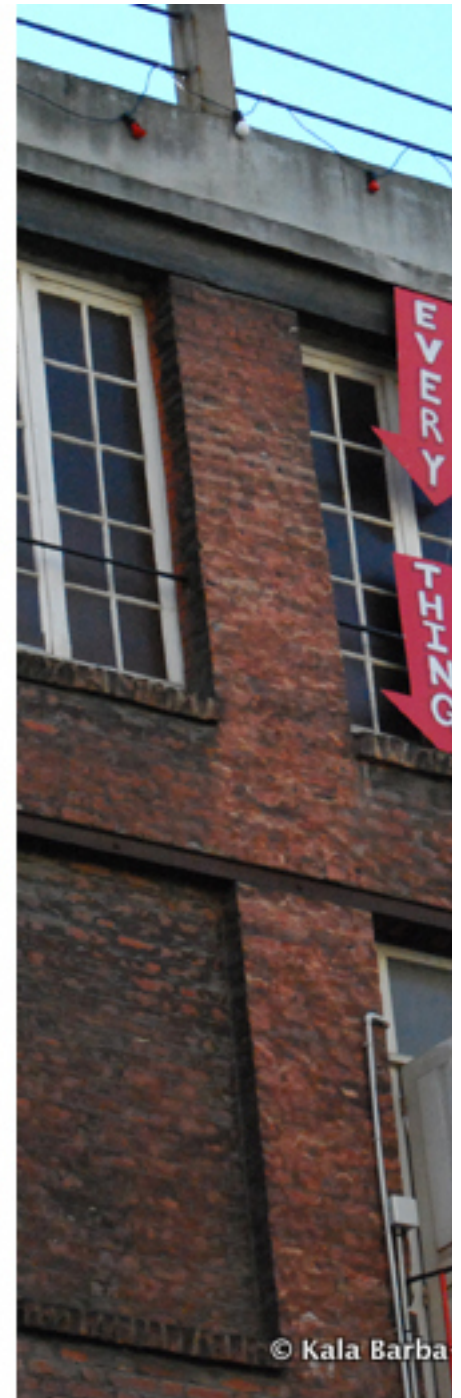
At first glance, the works are childish, disturbing. Almost, you could say, possessed. And I won't argue with you — they are. The artists are reclusive, autistic, schizophrenics, obsessive.

But oh, the insanity! Take [Henry Darger](#), for example, whose works are the first ones you'll see upon entering the museum. This reclusive Chicago janitor produced a manuscript of 15,145 pages documenting "The Story of the Vivian Girls," tracing from magazines and cut-outs to produce rambling panoramic scenes straight out of a nightmare you can't wake up from: prepubescent girls, some with male genitals, set up in sinister situations. It is simultaneously sad, matter-of-fact, and downright creepy.



This way to the Museum of Everything!

And what *can* one say about [George Widener](#), whose memory is a database of historical dates and census population statistics? I found his doom-filled “Friday Disasters” works utterly striking – a calendar filled with lists of heat waves, hurricanes, earthquakes and plane crashes that took place on a Friday (which left me feeling uncomfortable, what with the day I was there being a Friday and all). And then there is [Guo Fengyi](#), a Chinese factory worker whose practice of Qigong helped unfurl her visions onto floor-to-ceiling rice paper scrolls : beautiful, controlled brushstrokes giving birth to totem-like figures and demons.



The names of the participating artists and contributors, including [Maurizio Cattelan](#) and [Paul Chan](#), are tagged on the walls leading to the exhibit

As I moved from room to room I discovered a world which I felt I wasn't really supposed to see. Like the scarecrows made from cans and pots by the blind epileptic [Hawkins Bolden](#), or the yarn-swaddled sculptures of [Judith Scott](#), a deaf-mute with Down Syndrome. Or the hand-carved windmills and carousel replicas of blind French farmer [Emile Ratier](#). And the list goes on, room after room, artwork after artwork. It's a descent into a rabbit hole where art jargon ceases to exist, where your mind stops intellectualizing, where you just open your eyes and look, and feel.

The location of the exhibit couldn't be more fitting. The new art space [The Chalet Society](#), founded by former director of [Palais de Tokyo](#) Marc-Olivier Wahler, is a 1,000 m2 former Catholic school, abandoned and silent in the heart of St. Germain with peeling wallpaper and a musty scent. The 3-storey building, with its creaky floors, unheated classrooms, narrow hallways and winding iron staircases is the perfect place for such a curated event. It's such a wonderfully strange venue, a sore thumb in the otherwise chic district. I can't wait to see what other exhibits will be held here, once The Museum of Everything ends on December 16th.



The host of The Museum of Everything Paris – The Chalet Society

Before I knew it, I had reached the end of the show. I found myself in the café, where people were sipping coffee and browsing the postcards and art catalogues on display. I wanted to grab the person closest to me, take them by the shoulders and shake them silly while screaming “*Did you see that? Did that really happen?*” But I didn’t, because I *know* it happened, and that it was intoxicating, confusing, surreal and cryptic. And so yes, it is *so* worth a visit. If you think you’ve seen everything, well, think again.

Note: Earlier the website stated that you needed to print out an invitation by signing up online, but the person at the ticket entrance told me that they had ended the invite-only access. Entrance is 5€.

Warning: Taking pictures are strictly prohibited in the exhibit – there are people constantly patrolling the rooms, and there is a 1000€ fine if you’re caught, so don’t be cheeky now.

[The Museum of Everything](#), presented by the [Chalet Society](#)

14 boulevard Raspail, 75007

Metro: line 12 (Rue du Bac)

Opens Wed-Sun 11am-7pm, open till 8pm on Fri & Sat