Everything But

The Museum of Everything was founded by filmmaker and collector James Brett in London in 2009. Describing itself as "a space for artists and creators outside modern society," it opened its first exhibition during Frieze Art Fair in a space north of Regent's Park in 2009. *Exhibition #2* took place at the Tate Modern in May 2010, and in October 2010 the museum returned again to its inaugural space with *Exhibition #3*. *Exhibition #4* opened in September 2011 in Selfridges department store, London.

By Jonathan Griffin

Peter runs a shop in a small town in England's Lake District, selling a range of objects that he makes from horn and leather; some are briskly functional, like horses' bridles, while others, such as engraved spoons or key fobs, are more ornamental. A few years ago, to pass the time while he watched television in the evenings, Peter bought himself a book titled *How to Draw*. He now sells his drawings—watercolor sketches on blank postcards—from a box on the counter of his shop for 50 pence each. He draws animals mainly. The pictures are inexpert and childishly wonky, but they are also sincere, funny and often loaded with pathos. An image of two pheasants, for instance, regarding each other across a field, is an enigmatic but atmospherically pregnant encounter. A fat ginger cat stares out from uneven eyes, proudly and stupidly. Peter is highly prolific; when I visited the shop, I bought ten drawings and had to resist the urge to purchase more.

I display the drawings, unframed, on a shelf in my home. I have frequently considered ways to show them more publicly, perhaps in an exhibition alongside other artists' work. My affection for Peter's drawings, however, raises a series of perplexing questions about patronage and patronization that I have shied away from answering. How much of my interest is born from my experience of meeting this shy, self-effacing

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man in a tiny shop off a cobbled alleyway in a picturesque country town? What am I projecting onto Peter and his personal circumstances that augments that which is solely evident in the art works? What are his intentions in his work, and what are his ambitions as an artist? Would I still be interested in the drawings if I saw them in a fashionable commercial art gallery? What about a museum? Or a kitschy craft and gift shop? Another question to which I don't have an answer is whether Peter is what people call an "outsider artist." That may be because there is no widely agreed upon definition for outsider art; indeed, many scholars and institutions working within and around the genres of folk art, naïve art, art brut, Neuve Invention, vernacular art, marginal art, intuitive art, visionary art, the art of the mentally ill, and art therapy reject the label of outsider art altogether. It was the British art critic Roger Cardinal who first coined the term in 1972, as a translation and extension of Jean Dubuffet's category of art brut. Dubuffet had, in turn, invented art brut in 1945 after reading psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn's 1922 book *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (The Artistry of the Mentally Ill). Pieces seized from Prinzhorn's personal collection of art by his patients had been shown in 1937 in the

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notorious National Socialist exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) alongside that of Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Wassily Kandinsky. Dubuffet, whose own stylistic developments were so influenced by the work he championed, admired art brut for being "created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses," outside of language and the "culture of mandarins" evidenced by contemporary Western art.[1]

Today, the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne has the power alone to bestow the title of art brut. As its director from 1975 to 2001, Michel Thevoz defined art brut as that which is "produced by

people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned," who live "on the fringes of society."[2] The American Folk Art Museum in New York, along with other leading institutions including The Museum of Visionary Art in Baltimore, rejects the term "outsider art" for being patronizing to individuals. These institutions prefer the term "self-taught art," an expression that tacitly acknowledges the centrality of the academy in what might be called mainstream contemporary art. Some also now distance themselves from the art of mentally disabled people that comes out of facilities such as Creative Growth in Oakland, California. This "workshop art," as it is sometimes called, has been promoted and sold through mainstream channels, such as curator Matthew Higgs's White Columns gallery in New York; profits are split (irreproachably) between the artist and the workshop. It is in this particularly delicate field however that ethical dilemmas concerning support and exploitation become particularly fraught.

In recent years, one of the most prominent platforms for the exposure of these kinds of art has been The Museum of Everything, in London. Its curator and founder, James Brett, shares with

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the aforementioned museums a preference for the term "self-taught art" when talking about the diverse objects and images he includes in his exhibitions. The first incarnation of the project occupied a derelict dairy in London's upscale Primrose Hill, and opened its doors in October 2009, the same week as the Frieze Art Fair; it was free to enter (though donations, "from £1 to £1 million," were cheekily requested). The Museum of Everything, however, is not a museum but a mobile curatorial program, and it does not share a museum's commitment to objectivity and scholarship. Brett himself is a property entrepreneur and filmmaker, as well as a collector of idiosyncratic self-taught art; the exhibition was designed to showcase his collection alongside various other borrowed works. It seemed pitched as a cocky David in opposition to the economic Goliath of Frieze, situated a short walk away through Regent's Park.

Adopting a deliberately ramshackle curatorial aesthetic, work was hung densely on mostly unpainted walls and labels were written in wonky hand-lettering on scraps of wood; in at least one instance, a misspelled name had simply been crossed out and rewritten. Of course, it was clear what Brett was aiming at. A clean white institutional space would be far from appropriate, he seemed to argue, for work largely

made in private and which, in a few cases, was produced by artists confined to another kind of white-walled institution: the psychiatric hospital. The result, however, was a self-consciously manic tone that, ultimately, implied the cruel mimicry of a childlike or mentally disabled aesthetic. Combined with the "step right up" language adopted in literature around the exhibition, it conjured nothing so much as a circus freakshow, appealing to visitors' weakness for voyeurism and prurience.

What jarred most of all, however, was the way in which artists in the exhibition were each presented by an artist, curator, gallerist or musician from "mainstream" culture. From Jarvis Cocker to Grayson Perry and Hans Ulrich Obrist, these well-known names introduced each artist via a short text, detailing their own personal relationship to the work. The implication was that it was they who were discovering the artist and leading them by the hand, blinking, into the light of public exposure.

This clumsy strategy of contextualization and legitimization was followed again when The Museum of Everything was invited to travel to the Pinacoteca Agnelli in Turin, in April 2010. However for its latest exhibition, Brett has switched direction entirely and enlisted a member of the art establishment, Sir Peter Blake, to curate the show based around his own collection of curios and circus memorabilia, prominently including the macabre stuffed animal dioramas of Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter. While The Museum of Everything's very name boasts about the breadth of its remit, to present a sideshow entertainer such as Potter in the same gallery that months before displayed work by the deaf and mute Down's syndrome suffering artist Judith Scott, or that of the traumatized and reclusive Henry Darger, seems to me to be in highly questionable taste.

Nevertheless, The Museum of Everything was acclaimed by the viewing public and the press alike. Why is it that exhibitions of self-taught art are invariably so popular, not only with the general public but also with the contemporary art world? I would suggest that self-taught art, whoever it is made by, appears to display qualities that many people feel are lacking in the professionalized, internationalized world of contemporary art. It is made outside the academy, and outside of the market. Such work, it seems, rejects the primacy of language in its interpretation and critique, speaking directly and powerfully in terms that are accessible to all. The tools required to unlock it are biographical rather than intellectual; popular culture is far better attuned to personal narratives rather than abstract philosophical theories. Most of all, self-taught art arises from inner compulsion and "passion" (not a word heard often these days), rather than cold strategy and careerist positioning. Contrary to some assumptions, any self-taught

artists are manifestly ambitious for their work; in an essay about the art produced at Creative Growth, John MacGregor reports that "Anthony [Eng] loved to tell all visitors to the Center that he was a great artist and had a business card printed to that effect."[3] Whether mentally disabled, obsessive or fervently religious, most self-taught artists are, at the broadest level, subject to motivations experienced by all artists: self-identification, articulation, control and productiveness. MacGregor notes that "In most, but not all, an audience is being sought, an attempt is being made to share something of importance."[4] And that something is as subjective, and particular to its creator, as any other individuating creation. In that same publication, a drawing by William Scott, outlining plans for a regenerated, utopian San Francisco, promises: "Disabilities Cancelled," "Prisons Jails Cancelled," "Evils Cancelled," "Gays Lesbians Cancelled." Scott has been honored with exhibitions at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (curated by artist Jeremy Deller), White Columns in New York, as well as the Museum of Everything. The more complicated question, never considered by Yood, asks if artists such as Scott should ever be restrained from expressing themselves in the public realm.

Another myth, central to the world of outsider art, is that this work, and these artists, are truly "outside" of something in the first place. How many people, unless severely mentally disabled, are truly unaware of at least the most basic structures around art, whether that is simply the cultural importance attached to a picture hung on a wall, or the convention of using oil paint on canvas? Michel Thevoz would argue that bona fide practitioners of art brut are indeed oblivious in this sense; proof, however, is much harder to come by and, I would argue, underestimates the pervasiveness of our cultural norms and traditions. At another end of the outsider spectrum, Henry Darger, one of the most widely celebrated self-taught artists of the twentieth century, has recently been demonstrated by a number of scholars notably by Brooke Davis Anderson in a recent monograph on Darger's work to have been influenced by a range of fine art and pop-cultural sources, from Jan van Eyck to advertisements for Coppertone sunscreen. All artists, she writes, are "in one way or another responding to the appetites of their communities," even working in isolation. "Can we not finally acknowledge that autodidact Henry Darger was looking through a similarly critical eye [to Andy Warhol, Richard Hamilton or Roy Lichtenstein] onto the same landscape?"[5]

Instead, through the foregrounding of biography, and idiosyncratic display techniques such as those adopted by the Museum of Everything, these artists remain "other," at a remove from the world of contemporary culture that we ourselves inhabit. Maybe we can attribute this to a conservative wish to cling to the remaining tatters of the Romantic myth of artistic genius, and of that myth's traditional association of creativity with madness. Perhaps, still more disturbingly, it can be traced to the flourishing outsider art market, which now even has its own annual art fair, based in New York. Collectors of self-taught art do not, by and large, ever have to engage with the artists who make the work they buy, those artists belonging to social or racial strata that keep them metaphorical, if not geographical, worlds away.

But how different, really, are self-taught artists from contemporary practitioners whose work is collected by museums, discussed in universities and reviewed in magazines? They are equally likely to be self-absorbed, dysfunctional and socially marginalized. One key difference is that, while artists such as Tracey Emin or Grayson Perry may have just as distinctive (and frequently invoked) biographies as many outsider artists, they themselves are eloquent and convincing when talking about their work. By and large, it is the educational system that instils this ability; without it, self-taught artists struggle to develop their own critical framework that raises their practices above whimsy or novelty. Perhaps the demand for such a framework is a function of the art world's loss of confidence; as the market slows and collectors become more hesitant, so too do institutional and curatorial interests inevitably become more guarded, or hamstrung, or compromized. In an essay titled "Finding a Place for the Self-Taught in the Art World(s)," the critic Charles Russell observed that the interchangeability of terms for self-taught and mainstream art worlds indicates "a general confusion about the nature and value

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of art or aesthetic activity in general in this culture."[6] Surely by reassessing just what it is that we find compelling in art objects, and by dispensing with qualifying categorizations that simultaneously serve to fetishize and sequester whole spheres of creativity, we can reinvigorate the category of art as well as finding ways to value the cultural contributions of some of the most neglected members of our society. ■

NOTES

1—Jean Dubuffet, "Place à l'incivisme" (Make way for incivism), in *Art and Text*, no. 27 (December 1987–February 1988): 36; Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions", in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, eds. Kristine Stiles, Peter Howard Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 192.

2—Michel Thevoz: http://www.rawvision.com/outsiderart/whatisoa.html

3—In a 1986 essay on the distinguished self-taught artist Martín Ramirez, the critic James Yood epitomized many of these commonly-held ideas about outsider artists: "Free from hypocrisy, free from greed and envy, free from cruelty and lust, free from the ego, it is they who are natural, direct and *authentic*: their actions spring from need, not ambition, and from a mind which is conscious and unconscious at the same moment." Quoted in Carol S. Eliel, "Moral Influence and Expressive Intent," in *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18; originally from "Martin Ramirez: Madness and Arcadian Dream", in *New Art Examiner* 14, no. 2 (October 1986); John M. MacGregor, *One is Adam, One is Superman: The Artists of Creative Growth* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 9

4—Ibid.

5—Brooke Davis Anderson, "An Artist's Studio at 851 Webster Avenue," in *Henry Darger*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (New York: Prestel USA, 2009), 88

6—Charles Russell, "Finding a Place for the Self-Taught in the Art World(s)," in *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, ed. Charles Russell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 4

ILLUSTRATIONS

I The Museum of Everything, *Exhibition #1*, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Torino, 2010

II The Museum of Everything, *Exhibition #1*, with works by Martin Ramirez, Bill Taylor, Clarence and Grace Woolsey, London, 2009
Photo Christoffer Rundquist

III The Museum of Everything, *Exhibition #1*, with works by Henry Darger, London, 2009
Photo Antony Crolla

IV The Museum of Everything, *Exhibition #2*, Tate Modern, London, 2010
Photo Andonis Trattos

V The Museum of Everything, *Exhibition #1*, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Torino, 2010