

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Daniel Baumann**

Daniel Baumann

b 1967 (USA)

Daniel Baumann is an art historian, curator and writer for *Kunst-Bulletin*, *Parkett* and *Spike Art Quarterly*. Recipient of the Swiss Award for Best Curator (2006) and Special Advisor for *Frieze* (2009/10), Baumann is curator of the Adolf Wölfli Foundation at the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh (2013). Baumann was a contributing writer for *Exhibition #1*.

[START]

MoE: Daniel, you're an independent curator, you're also the curator of the **Adolf Wolfli Foundation** at the **Museum of Fine Arts Bern, Switzerland**, you have a passion for contemporary art, self-taught art, art brut and everything in between. Can we talk about institutions, academies and the relationship of mainstream to the work which fascinates us?

DB: Any institution wants to promote values and install authority through discourse. What you and I share is a certain incredulity, a scepticism for the values institutions build up, because we look at works that are extraordinary and spectacular, but which are not shown within traditional art institutions. We are convinced that these works must be seen in public space and we think about what can be done to change that.

A parallel situation can be found in arts' education today. In **Europe**, young students are confronted with the formalised **Bologna System**. In **America** they have a very expensive and commercialised system. Both lead to institutionalisation and current initiatives for alternative academies and self-empowered education in contemporary art reflect a discontent. They hark back to the 1960s, when artists like **Joseph Beuys** forced academies to open up, encouraging students to do what they wanted.

What is interesting is that the artists you are looking at for this show, the ones excluded by mainstream institutions, have their own ateliers, workshops and studios. Yet the best of these workshops are not based on the **Bologna System**, nor part of any educational system at all. They run more along the lines of the **Joseph Beuys** model, which could actually be a model for all art academies.

MoE: That makes a lot of sense and I have observed two kinds of workshop. One is based primarily on therapy. These workshops tend not to see the art produced as creatively or aesthetically meaningful, nor do they understand the commercial aspects of the work. As such they are often well-intended, but they rarely inspire their artists.

The more progressive workshops, particularly those in **Europe** and **America**, put aesthetic value and prices on the work. They give the artists a free range to find the best medium and believe it is important to offer artists a revenue stream. They see the connection between art and the market.

I am interested in this mirroring between contemporary art and this other secret art world. How can the secret one inform the contemporary one?

DB: And the other way around.

MoE: That happens naturally. The subculture always looks to mainstream culture for validation.

DB: For this year's show, how are you proceeding? Are you creating an art academy? Is the art academy the show? Are you inviting artists to participate in workshops? Who teaches who?

MoE: We will show work from the best studios and workshops in the world, predominantly living artists. We will also set up a workshop for artists with disabilities and invite contemporary artists to join in, to sit at the table and participate if they wish. If they have a particular skill, like the potter **Grayson Perry**, perhaps they can even demonstrate that ability.

DB: I love that. It opens up things from an unexpected side.

MoE: Even within the art brut community, there is resistance to this genre. They accept classic artists like the one you focus on, **Adolf Wolfli**, but someone as contemporary as **William Scott** encounters all sorts of issues because that same community sees his work as somehow less pure. Do you think this is correct? Can we see them as part of the same idea?

DB: I am not sure, that it is *the same idea*. People use terms like outsider art and art brut to frame this work. Yet the terminology is now evolving in different directions, because there is no common geography, biography, school or style. They have nothing to do with each other.

This is the threat to institutions, art history and our whole way of thinking. These artists don't fit in and it freaks them all out! With **Wolfli**, for example, he is both an outsider to outsider art and an outsider to insider art. To occupy this position is a great achievement.

MoE: Language has become interesting to me over the course of this project. Contemporary art seems trapped in a hamster wheel of Duchampian notions. The other tread wheel of course is the market, which dominates.

There is also the difficulty of biography. In our first exhibition, we only revealed one biographical sentence for each artist. If you wanted to know more, the suggestion was that you had to go out and find out yourself, to avoid the pitfalls of approaching work with too much personal narrative.

For example, as soon as you say an artist has a disability, you get a different read, generally a sympathetic perception of the work. It's much better to look at the work first, then let its construction unfold.

DB: Yes, biography doesn't make the work better or worse. However if you deny it, you may deny incredibly harsh social realities we need to be aware of. What **The Museum of Everything** does is make space to look at these things differently. Beyond the art, it also uses humour - and that was a real revelation to me. Institutions do not use humour, it undermines too much of their authority. To make space to look at things and to laugh are major contributions.

MoE: It's interesting you mention humour. A lot of the work we are looking at is funny. The artists express humour and are witty about what they see and how they portray it. Institutions don't like humour do they?

DB: Instead of laughing at themselves or their approach, they present an authoritarian discourse about humour!

MoE: Now that is funny! Humour in contemporary art is almost entirely about irony. But irony doesn't often play a part in this work. It tends to be more direct. The self-awareness and lack of irony in the work here perhaps reflects the difficulty in including it - it's just too direct.

DB: The work is extremely direct and bold. We appreciate it as an alternative voice if it does not impose itself on us. Yet these artists don't care about the mainstream, they have been rejected from it. The difficulty for us is that when we want to integrate them into a mainstream situation, they don't fit. They are to a certain degree a totally foreign body.

This alternative view is so radical, so out of tune, it is an intellectual challenge even to understand what is going on.

It's an anti-intellectual challenge. When you talk about someone who is non-verbal, it's just an attribute, they are inside themselves and what they make is their language. It's important for us to talk about it and intellectualise it; but at some point you hit a wall and realise it's about feelings, how you can understand and interpret these feelings, how you can speak this language and whether there is a way to re-understand visual language through these artists.

If somebody is using a different part of their brain to communicate, to talk, to make work, there's not even an intention to make art. If we call it art, that is our assumption. We say it's a thing of beauty, but that's us, not them.

DB: When something is formulated in a surprising and formally precise way, it translates into beauty. We try to understand and misunderstand the work, look at it, read it, try to talk about it, and can't do it outside the emotions. It's the same with contemporary art.

MoE: What if that beauty is entirely of our creation, not theirs?

DB: I don't see any difference in value. If somebody gets there and is highly trained and intellectual, I appreciate it to the same degree as if somebody comes from another side.

MoE: It becomes a level playing field, which is perhaps the ultimate goal. I still believe this art may be closer to a pure creative gesture and the universality of that act. I'm not so sure about the imposition of aesthetics and beauty and whether that matters, for example comparing these artists to **Cy Twombly** to convince us that it has merit.

DB: I think it can be done, but not in order to legitimise something or impose absurd values, but to understand what the person is saying or translating. I learn from art and I do it mostly through comparisons. This keeps things going.

MoE: So you would rather have this as part of the never-ending extension and expansion of creation, rather than the re-adjustment of a grand theory.

DB: I think that's exactly what their power is. If you look at how much passion the art brut field has, it simply reflects how strong the opposition against it is. If you judge the walls by the level of the passion, they must be very thick.

MoE: I still feel it's only a matter of language. It is **The Museum of Everything**, not **The Museum of Weirdos**. We have an inclusive name, therefore people are open to what we show. Language can change perception. We use the word *museum*, we're perceived as a museum.

DB: Most of the time, a museum represents the view of the ruling class - the king, the donor, the collector, the state. *Museum* is about exclusion and inclusion. If you combine that with the word *everything* you dissolve that authority and make fun of the claims that go with the word. That's why I like what you do - you build up a tension between the values and ways we look at things. I've pulled out of trying to solve the tension, it's better just to carry on doing it and see what happens next.

MoE: That's my conclusion as well. By doing it, you not only show the world what exists, you become the advocate of the artists because the politics of inclusion anywhere else are just too tough.

DB: It was important to be exposed to late Swiss curator **Harald Szeemann's** activities who discovered artefacts of which he thought too interesting and too important to keep separate from the rest, from the public. He introduced many foreign bodies into the art system and did it with subversive joy and real passion.

MoE: How did **Szeemann** rationalise this? He's been hugely influential.

DB: As I understood it, he claimed that whether it's art or not, whether they're taught or not, artists like these suggest new ways of thinking, building and forming. They depart from conventions and norms and the work becomes more enigmatic and less understandable, but that's no reason not to look at it. Remember, it was the 1960s: under the pavement is the beach. Can we still think things upside down? Or do we want a boring life?

MoE: It returns to my starting point. Is the cup on the saucer or the saucer under the cup? These are only words, ways of comprehending what actually goes on. We created these structures, we can change them. We just have to decide whether we're going to walk home on the pavement or through the sand.

[END]

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