

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Dr Johann Feilacher**

Dr Johann Feilacher

b 1954 (Villach, Austria)

Originally trained as a psychiatrist, Dr Johann Feilacher is an artist, curator and director of the Art/Brut Center Gugging. Feilacher has co-curated several exhibitions including Weltenwandler at Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (2010) and Arnulf Rainer's Art Brut at La Maison Rouge in Paris (2005). Artists from Gugging in Exhibition #4 include Leonhard Fink and Günther Schützenhöfer.

[START]

MoE: **Gugging** is one of the world's first and most important creative studios for artists with disabilities. Can you tell me how you came to be here and what your background is.

JF: In the 1970s I was studying medicine and working as an artist. **Doctor Leo Navratil** was the psychiatrist at **Gugging** and was working with patients making art. He invited me here because I had both an artistic and a psychiatric background.

MoE: At that point, where had **Navratil** got to in his journey with this work?

JF: In the 1960s he had made experimental drawings with patients and used them for diagnosis. There were some people whose drawings were especially interesting to him, people who didn't just show a diagnosis, but an artistic sensibility.

Navratil became fascinated by these artists and in the history of artworks made by people with mental illness. He started to read about it and sent images to the artist **Jean Dubuffet** to gauge his opinion. **Dubuffet** said these people were talented and should be supported - and **Navratil** was inspired.

At that time, patients lived in an old psychiatry building. It took a decade until he was able to get a small building for them, the **Zentrum fir Kunst-Psychotherapie**. He invited 18 people to participate: ten with talent from the previous 15 years and eight others. His interest was to support patients, to write scientific articles about them and offer therapy.

When I became director in 1986 my interest was primarily in art. I changed the name of the building to **Haus der Kunstler**. It signalled the end of a therapy approach and we separated the art practice from the clinic. Mental illness became a private thing for the artists. Art became their job.

MoE: Would it be correct to call **Navratil** a pioneer?

JF: Yes, he was a pioneer, although he was not the first. That was **Walter Morgenthaler** at the **Waldau Clinic** in **Switzerland** who wrote a single revolutionary sentence: *Adolf Wolfli is an artist*. This was the first time in history that someone called a man in a psychiatric institution an artist.

Navratil wrote a book but the psychiatry and art worlds were not very interested. Only the avant-garde took an interest.

MoE: Did he have an active relationship with the art world?

JF: No, but his son who became an artist created many of the relationships **Gugging** had with artists. When **Navratil**'s book was published, some museum directors and collectors, as well as artists like **Arnulf Rainer**, came to **Gugging**.

MoE: **Arnulf Rainer** was an advocate for the entire field for many years.

JF: **Rainer** loves outsider art and art brut. His interest is primarily in the collecting.

MoE: You yourself come out of an arts practice, so on one side you have an empirical nature, on the other a creative side.

JF: Yes - and I still work as a sculptor in the **USA** and **Europe**. This is necessary for me so that I can see it from both sides. My psychiatry practice ended 15 years ago.

MoE: As an artist, do you think there is a line at which it transitions from being therapy to being art?

JF: Therapy is seldom connected to art. To make therapy you have to know exactly what you want out of it. There must be reasons, a clear area of interest, something you want to explore or change. Today almost everything you do with so-called mental patients is therapy - that is how hospitals and doctors make their money. The word *therapy* is everywhere!

In truth therapy is a special and rare thing. For mental patients it is a mixture of medical experimentation and social therapy, which means being involved in having an identity or place in society. These people don't have a real place in society when they are ill. The media and press work against them, which is why if a single mentally ill person murders somebody, it can remain in the papers for weeks.

What's important when you work with these people is that they achieve integration. The art itself isn't therapy, the success is therapy because it helps the artist to integrate. But art and integration rarely coincide.

MoE: My own feeling is that the word *therapy* has changed over time. We understand it on a more generalist level; like you say, everything is therapy, shopping is therapy. We see it as having therapeutic benefits, rather than clinical or medical therapy, which is very specific and more limited.

In your experience do your artists perceive artistic success and know they are artists? And at what point does someone become an artist and no longer a patient undergoing therapy?

JF: Why are some people artists and some not? To say a product is art, I personally believe it should be unique in some way. It can be the language of a drawing or of forms and colours. Many people have similar styles of drawing. You can see it in studios and art academies across the world. An artist needs a long time to find their own individual style.

Brut artists don't have an art education, they educate themselves. When they invent new forms, then in my opinion they become artists. After all, there are artists in the art world and there are many others who just paint and draw. There is one **Picasso** and a hundred who want to be like **Picasso**.

MoE: We may prefer **Picasso** to the others, but aren't they all artists? The difference you are describing is one of subjective quality. Surely art encompasses all?

JF: Art is decided by a group of people in a specific time and place. In my opinion it's always subjective, because it changes from continent to continent and culture to culture.

MoE: What do you think of the proposition that art can only be made by an artist who intends to make art?

JF: If you make something, the intention to make art or not is of no importance. Creativity is essential - the mental ability which begins in childhood and which everybody has.

MoE: So what do you need to do in order to allow an artist to grow? What do you do at **Gugging**? What is the approach there?

JF: **Navratil** was a bit different to me; he showed people reproductions of artworks and told them to copy them, like in the old art academies. Some of the artists, like **Johann Hauser**, transformed the work into their own versions.

I changed this approach because I wanted as little influence as possible. Life itself is influence enough - and the best results are when you do not push your own opinions.

Today at **Gugging**, artists do not get any kind of arts education. We simply create a happy environment for them, where they feel well, where we help with their psychological problems and arrange things so that they can make art.

MoE: So how do you encourage them? What if they get into a particular thing and can't get out of it?

JF: I express my opinion. If an artist wants to draw windows for the rest of his life, that is okay. After the first 100, I guess it no longer becomes interesting to me.

MoE: I've heard stories where an artist has needed a catalyst to be creative

JF: Any opinion is an influence. What you have to realise is that that everyone wants some level of success. Lack of success becomes an influence in and of itself.

I also believe that art is not a hobby, it's work. It's something that should come from you, that you have to do, that might take hundreds of nights to complete.

MoE: I spoke to **Elisabeth Telsnig** who works with **Josef Hofer**. When she wasn't sure how to develop his work, she called you for advice. You suggested she give him coloured pencils and good paper. Is this how you approach materials at **Gugging**?

JF: At the time, **Elisabeth** was using very cheap materials that were for children. Giving **Josef** the right materials was an influence, as was giving him the wrong ones! On the other hand, any artist uses what he wants. **August Walla** mixed over 80 colours with vinegar and water. That was his choice!

Artists do not think about materials the way people who have to do restoration in twenty years time do. **Josef Beuys** did not use good materials half the time. Our job at the studio is to offer the best materials. If artists don't want them, it's up to them. If they do, it's good for the life of the artwork.

MoE: If somebody were to set up a workshop themselves what would you suggest are the most important ingredients?

JF: The most important thing is that you choose support staff who are used to art and not concerned about working with disabled people. They need to understand that work by artists with disabilities has a very different style and quality.

They should also be able not to influence the artists, because even if you say that you love a piece of work or look at it in a way that suggests something bad, you are still influencing. Staff members need to know how to control their expressions.

I would offer basic materials. If an artist wants more, he can ask for it. Creativity is not about having a large canvas and oils; creativity can be a small piece of paper and a pencil.

MoE: In some ways you are a purist. Yet when I think about the most famous artists in the world, many of the best decisions they made were the decisions of their gallerists and managers.

JF: With galleries it's different, because the relationship is about money. This is a business influence which helps the artist sell. It isn't about art, it's business.

MoE: Let's say we are running a workshop, the new artist is the one everyone wants to buy. How do you deal with that?

JF: During a creative workshop, nobody from the outside world should be allowed to see the results. I know how important this is as a sculptor myself. I have seen how disturbing other people's opinions are to my practice. Customers, galleries, museum directors, all try to change the work into something that is easier to sell. It is seldom a change for the better!

MoE: How do you approach the sale of artworks?

JF: A good artist with a disability should get the same for his work as any artist of the same calibre. The artists here cannot make contacts in the business world, nor can they run their lives with the money they make, despite the fact they are great artists. I help them achieve all of this. Every artist should have equal rights.

MoE: You are talking about artists' rights, which shouldn't matter whether you are fully or partially able.

JF: The artist is the owner of his piece, wherever and however he makes it. The institution gets nothing for it. To do this I formed a company which the artists own. This company runs the gallery. If the gallery makes money, they do too.

MoE: There are many workshops in German-speaking countries. I wondered why that was?

JF: **Sigmund Freud** was important. He had new ideas about the unconscious. He came from a German-speaking country and was first published in **Germany**. That's why so many of these workshops and ways of thinking came from these countries.

MoE: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you very much I appreciate your time and the work you do.

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