

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Tom di Maria** and **David Byrne**

David Byrne

b 1952 (Dumbarton, Scotland)

David Byrne is a musician, artist, writer, filmmaker and cycling activist. Founder of record label Luaka Bop, he is known primarily as the founder and principal songwriter of the band Talking Heads. Winner of Oscar, Grammy, Golden Globe and other awards, Byrne's work as a visual artist includes *Playing the Building* at London's Roundhouse (2009). Byrne was a contributor to *Exhibition #1*.

Tom di Maria

b 1959 (New York, USA)

Curator and filmmaker Tom di Maria is a former assistant director at the Berkeley Art Museum at UC Berkeley and director of Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California and Galerie Impaire in Paris. Exhibitions of Creative Growth artists include *Create* at the Berkeley Art Museum (2011) and *Glossalia: Languages of Drawing* at the Museum of Modern Art (2008). Di Maria was a speaker during *Exhibition #1*.

[START]

MoE: Tom, you run **Creative Growth**, one of the longest running progressive studios in the world for artists with developmental and other disabilities. Can we start off by describing the difference between art-making and art therapy?

TdM: Art therapy is a specific practice that asks a person to engage with personal dynamic through the work: *How does that make you feel? Why did you choose this colour?*

We never do that. But something hugely therapeutic comes from being supportive, having a voice, being able to communicate.

MoE: So you don't do therapy, you do art. In **Britain** therapy seems to be a more general practice, intended to engage the participant and make them better in some way. There is a lot of art therapy here. There is not very much therapeutic art!

TdM: That's helpful to know. When you are talking about therapy, the cultural context matters.

MoE: As you know, the museum is presenting the first ever large-scale exhibition of art from progressive workshops like **Creative Growth**. How do we ensure that people understand the context?

TdM: It's often difficult to explain what we do to funders and the public. Sometimes when you say *disabled* and *charity*, people respond positively, but we are also not afraid to discuss our artists' situations, especially as their economic situations are sometimes more difficult than their particular disabilities.

What I truly believe is that the artists we are discussing are the artists of our era. They are redefining what art-making is and where it can come from. If you push that thesis, people see it and understand the context. It becomes a richer, more meaningful experience. The problem with the media is that everyone wants to reduce it to one sentence.

For example, why do you have a sustained interest in this work? As an exhibitor and collector, I would imagine it's not because you feel sorry for these artists. It's because something about the work resonates deeply within you, either aesthetically or within the realm of what you find interesting. To not have that as a point of connection does not allow for a deep and sustained relationship with the work.

DB: I'm going to jump in here and say that *all* artwork is therapeutic for its makers. The biggest art world megastars and the lowliest Sunday painters - it's therapeutic for all of them. I can testify that making music and singing - even if it's not one's own compositions - does the same thing.

Having a disability or dealing with tough social or cultural situations might exacerbate that process, it might make the therapeutic aspect more visible and less subtle - but there's no fundamental difference. Doing and making helps everyone.

I also wonder what constitutes disability. Sometimes it's just being a social misfit. That spectrum covers all sorts of people. In another age **Francis Bacon** would have been institutionalised for his squalid living/working situation and sexual habits. Plenty of fine artists I have personally known are borderline dysfunctional, but some have managed to *pass* and are judged mostly by their work.

MoE: One view is that we are all disabled, it is just a matter of degree. It makes sense, of course. So much is to do with a narrow world-view of what ability is and who the normal folk are. The problem is that people with disabilities are often defined only by those disabilities. We need to start seeing disabilities as abilities!

DB: I agree completely. And the criteria for being disabled changes over time as well. Plenty of incredibly successful folks can't function in the real world, but have enablers, assistants and a professional crew to prop them up. (You know who you are!) The justification is that these people's creative output is either so brilliant that it's worth it, or that they make so much money for others that it's worth it. The point is, they're as disabled as anyone else you can name.

I'm wary of saying *it's all relative* - but I myself find the whole disabled/functioning inside/outside argument irrelevant. The other issue raised is whether or not the *story* of the artist is integral to their art. Should art stand purely on its visual, aural or experiential basis? Or is it okay if some background, story or aspects of the artist's life or social context helps one appreciate the work?

To take some extreme examples: the clown paintings of serial killer **Jeffrey Dahmer** or the kitsch landscapes painted by a **Mr Hitler**. Maybe it is excusable to view those paintings subjectively, beyond their surface attributes. But for other artists we are blissfully unaware of their sexual habits, political affiliations and personal hygiene. **Jackson Pollock** was a drunk and **Norman Mailer** seems to have been a bit of an asshole; but

are those the lenses through which we must view their work? **Louise Bourgeois**? I love her work. She seemed to relish attaching a childhood family trauma as integral to the understanding of her work. What if - and this is just a what if - what if she were making it all up? What if the biographies that we come to believe are important to understanding some work - like the artists at **Creative Growth** - were misplaced, in error, or outright lies? What if that **Hitler** painting was actually done by my grandmother? Does that change the painting? Sometimes explanations and other extraneous information is an integral part of the work, or so it seems to me.

MoE: I don't know how to relate this to **Hitler** except to say we have a knock-out portrait of him by an artist in our show!

But you're completely right, biography is a dangerous magnet. From **Henry Darger** to **Judith Scott**, these compelling human stories can shout too loud. The trick is to let the art come first.

Of course if there is a relevant context, you have to communicate it. In our new show we have amazing work by an artist fascinated by light, cameras and ways of seeing. He makes oversize ceramic cameras, vintage models, glazed, totally incredible. Most fascinating of all, he's registered blind! It's essential to say that isn't it, what does one do?

DB: Yeah, where do you draw the line here? I'd love to believe that we can just stand in front of a piece of work and it will speak to us (or not) and that's all we need. The *sound* of a word affects its meaning. Context is part of how we experience the world - we have never ever experienced isolated context-free objects.

It's a tough one. I agree that one wouldn't want your ceramic camera artist to be referred to simply as a *blind artist*, as if that is the main thing that makes his work affecting.

MoE: What is clear to me is that people who like this work are interested in what makes us tick, how we think and especially how we think creatively. So do these artists go to the root of what creativity really is?

The other question for me is do we like **Dan Miller**'s work because it is good? Or is it good to us in the same way that we like to look at nature? Are we ascribing beauty that may not actually exist?

TdM: A musician can be technically trained, but that won't let them find their voice. **David**, you've done some very unique things in terms of your style and early work. You are creative in many ways. But you trained as a

visual artist. What are your thoughts on creativity, voice, technique and process?

DB: Thank you guys! As to the question of whether work is formally good, I do believe that **Dan's** work - and of course many others - touches something primal in us. We don't need to know all about him to feel it. The formal aspects of art do indeed push psychological and emotional buttons, it's not just about cool systems of organisation.

Many artists, especially the artists at **Creative Growth**, are in touch with parts of their bodies and psyches that the rest of us might shy away from. We feel them exposing parts of themselves - fears, anger, pleasure, exhilaration, obsessiveness - that are in us too, but we tend to keep a lid on those bits to help us function as social creatures. But we absolutely recognise these as parts of ourselves. If we didn't, then the work would just be aimless doodles and scribbles - and it's not.

MOoE: That's so well said. There is an artist in **Austria, Josef Hofer**, his main passions in life are drawing and masturbating - and so his oeuvre is an incredible sexually-liberated visual diary. You just wouldn't see that from a contemporary artist. Like you said, too many lids, too many bits!

DB: Bits!

MoE: One of the great things about the visual arts are that they eliminate time. That puts everyone on a level playing field. You can spend the same amount of time looking at an artwork by a contemporary artist as by an artist from **Creative Growth**. That makes for a very democratic medium.

MoE: **Tom**, say I want to set up my own art studio. What do I do? How do I start?

TdM: If you're like **Creative Growth**, you start from your home. You put paints on your table. You have artists come over. They come because they belong somewhere. It's not like going to school or doing a project. It becomes parallel to growing, communicating and starting a place in the world.

Then you have to allow for time. What are people doing, what are they asking for, what problems are they solving? You want to encourage this. There is no right or wrong. At **Creative Growth** if you are not hurting someone you are NOT wrong.

It's amazing how people find a human spirit in wanting to do better, wanting to improve. That's a key point: when you give people time to

figure things out on their own, that's when you find the breathtaking solutions. If you tell them how to solve a problem, you are likely to get something you want to see.

DB: Someone needs to tell this to a lot of art schools!

MoE: What materials do you provide? What way do you begin?

TdM: If you are talking about basic process, then get the most basic things that make a mark on paper. Crayons, oil sticks, pencils are the best place to start and the easiest for people to hold. Make a line on a surface, like basic cave painting. Think about how children first express themselves: the stick figure, the head and the two feet. You see this in adults with developmental disabilities. When you don't control the product, you are effectively saying to them: *What should a painting look like? Tell me what it should look like because I am not going to tell you!*

MoE: So you would never say: *That's not how a door should open.*

TdM: We would say: *Look at that door! That's a great door! What made you think about that door?* You talk about it. You say: *Tell me about that.*

MoE: So you have a home, you have materials and you have time and encouragement, trying not to direct or guide.

TdM: **Erin Punzel** is an artist who came to **Creative Growth** with little drawings she was obsessed with. My sense is she was doing them before she came to us in other programmes. People probably found it damn annoying because she wouldn't do anything else. For them it was like: *She won't do anything else!* For us it was like: *She won't stop, isn't that amazing! Lets give her a bigger piece of paper and see what happens!*

MoE: You don't do therapy, you are not guiding, but you are noticing change and trying to encourage development. How do you define a therapeutic line?

TdM: I would use words like *foster, encourage, support*. I have never been able to say it in one line. Just be open to where it's going.

Someone like **Erin Punzel**, who moves her lips in a way that is uniquely compelling and necessary, but who hasn't yet found a voice, is the perfect person for us to support and watch grow as we have with **Dan Miller, Tom Mitchell** and **Judith Scott**.

For two years **Judith** made rotating actions with her hands on the table. She was trying to take action but didn't know which action to take. You

help someone find their voice and that's what you do it for. When someone sings, it's phenomenal!

MoE: In terms of this imaginary art workshop, would there be stimulation? Art books? TV?

TdM: It depends. For people with autism, we have to remove stimulation. Autism is a mysterious spectrum of symptoms. If isolation provides someone with clarity to find their voice, then that's what's necessary. For somebody else, they may need prompts. Stimulation varies depending on the disability.

Dan Miller has autism. He needs to repeat the same questions again and again. He needs somebody to respond to him verbally. When staff help with that dialogue, it helps him be productive. It's exhausting to sit with him for five hours a day!

MoE: What advice would you give to an autistic artist?

TdM: Draw something from your mind, from your imagination, from your dreams, from what is bothering you. Sometimes words, numbers, and lists are good starting points too.

MoE: So you connect with the person and you verbalise. You would choose that over showing pictures to copy?

TdM: Yes, absolutely. Some people, especially those with disabilities, are afraid of doing something wrong.

DB: The whole question of autism and the **Asperger** spectrum hits very close to home. I'd venture that more than a few creative folks can be found lurking somewhere along that spectrum. I suspect I had a few of those affects years ago, but they tend to lessen over the years.

I'm convinced that making music, art and performing helped me a lot too. Although some of the **Creative Growth** artists are way further at one end of the spectrum than I every was or am, there might be some innate empathy there. Some similar things at work, like finding it tough dealing with social situations, but an ability to focus intensely, and concentrate.

MoE: Artists like **Dan Miller** and **William Scott** seem to have characteristics artists everywhere have, whatever their ability or disability. I don't want to romanticise or sentimentalise it, but I know that may be where my own interest comes in i.e. creativity as a medicine for psychological, neurological and other conditions.

DB: I agree that creativity of all sorts - that includes activities we might not classify as creative arts, like sports, cooking or conversation - is hugely therapeutic. For oneself, for the creator. As much as I love art, music and all the rest I'm skeptical that looking and listening are doing me any good. I suspect that most of the good is in the making.

MoE: Have you ever read **Oliver Sachs**? He highlights the role of music and the arts with the complicated goings-on of the mind.

DB: Oh yes, I've read most of his books. And before that I sometimes read case studies of folks who had sound and music related ailments. You hear about someone who found music terrifying, or physically upsetting, and of course their story became a kind of metaphorical narrative that explains, in a reverse kind of way, what music, for example might be. You try and understand what works and how, by hearing about all the various ways it can go horribly wrong and not work.

MoE: **David** you're a non-stop creative character - how does it all connect to you? Do you see this work as a mirror at all?

DB: I absolutely identify with much of this work. That said, I also hope I don't romanticise it, or the artists who produce it too much. We love the myth of the *crazy* artist, the *childlike* performer and the *antisocial* genius.

TdM: Yes, that's an important point. I have to say that there is also a certain darkness and pain from which many of our artists derive their motivation. While the work is often visually stunning, free and alive, that sometimes comes from a personal history that was otherwise. It's the case of the fire making the iron stronger, in this case making the work vital, urgent and necessary.

MoE: A lot of this seems to be about encouraging imaginative thought, changing the way artists think. If you get artists to copy a picture, you'll get an aesthetic, but if you engage their imagination, you might get a lot more.

TdM: Yes, that's right. We try to understand our process and methodology too. We have a phenomenal staff of artists and they learn from each other along the way too. We've been doing this for nearly 40 years - so it's important to know that it can take time, it's not instant.

We have also learned how to direct people back to their work if they get distracted. That's an art form too, getting people to focus. Encouraging imagination is a great way to look at it - and not an easy thing to do.

MoE: Common belief might suggest that somebody with a developmental disability doesn't have an imagination?

DB: This sounds like the argument that they're not real artists because they can't help it. They can't control their urge to create, it's somehow thought that it's not considered or lacks intent. Real artists can't help it either.

MoE: What I don't get is why the art world - as in the *art* world - is reluctant to accept these artists' works as art.

DB: Without going on a full on rant, the way work is evaluated in the *art* world is not solely based on quality, or how much a work moves you or inspires you, but on a host of other factors as well. Sometimes it comes close to the world of stamp collecting or the folks who collect action figures - and no one would claim that value in those worlds is based on whether a particular stamp is beautiful or not.

TdM: I don't know if it's imagination or a perspective on the world, or a refraction of what comes in through their eyes and out through their hands.

MoE: Surely imagination is what leads to creative gestures, even if the gesture comes first and the imagination comes next and puts form to it. There is no way you can do these things as a matter of automation. Even in the most basic works, there must be something that engages its maker creatively, because he or she is making decisions.

TdM: I think your point about imagination and creativity is well taken. When you are really engaged in creativity, it's based in the imagination. When that doesn't happen, you are directing the other person, you are prompting them.

MoE: I believe that - but I also know that some of the great artists of the genre, like **Johann Hauser**, re-produced images from books and magazines.

TdM: That's a great example of how visual reference can stimulate imagination. That's different than copying something that has been seen over and over again, which is not particularly creative or imaginative.

I think of it as dreaming. Wouldn't it be great to have a disc in your head and play back your dreams when you are awake? Some of our best artists do that because they interpret a shifted reality. There are images and ideas, but they are seeing it in a different way and are open to not having the outcome be what you would expect.

David, what leads you through a tune or into a riff or variation? How does technique influence that?

MoE: Tom what is different in your role at Creative Growth is you as the advocate. You fill the gap, you bring the materials to the table, you make decisions when somebody may not be capable of making those decisions for themselves. You facilitate the decision to sit down. It's not easy for most people as you said, but you help it happen.

TdM: Yes - comfort and safety are very important elements if you are working with an *at risk* population. It's difficult eliminating that vulnerability and creating a safe environment; but it is essential, when our artists believe that those constraints are gone, they open up.

TdM: In terms of logistics we need a variety of kinds of chairs. For example, people with seizure disorders need armchairs so they don't fall on the floor. We have 22 different styles, and an open floor plan, so everybody sees each other. There are different clusters depending on the different media.

MoE: So your advice is to tailor it and be specific to who's coming?

TdM: No two people are the same. Being in a classroom with 30 chairs all the same would never work at Creative Growth.

MoE: What about engagement - do you do group things?

TdM: We do social outings once or twice a year, we'll have a party or field trip. People bring their lunch every day and we have a lunchroom where everybody shares the experience. We don't critique the work people do. It's not like an art school where people sit around critiquing their work, but they gather and socialise and talk about life.

Many are life-long friends. People have been coming for over 30 years and relationships have been created. If you are doing a temporary or episodic workshop that would be hard. My experience tells me more time is better. Sustained workmanship leads to a better result.

MoE: Yes, it definitely occurs to me that the best work doesn't come out of a temporary situation, it comes out of long-term involvement. A very small bespoke workshop available on a daily basis is going to do more good than a much more sophisticated workshop available half a day every week.

TdM: I would agree and it doesn't have to be sophisticated.

DB: I wonder if this process and the approach that Tom elucidates can be spread and exported? One then wonders how much incredible work lies waiting to be set free ... and I wonder if these folks with disabilities who are somewhat dysfunctional are less inhibited about letting this part of themselves out, once a context and situation allows it?

MoE: The answer's a firm yes! There is amazing work out there, thousands of Dan Millers and William Scotts, they simply don't have a Creative Growth to go to.

Whether or not a progressive studio exists seems to depend on geography. America, Belgium, Germany, Japan, Holland and Australia: hip culturally connected countries which privilege artists with disabilities and let them get on with it. I'm hoping our show will expand the spread of these studios. I didn't think the museum was a political animal, turns out it has to be.

TdM: Disability is very political. So is art.

DB: The next step, in my imaginary future, would be to apply these lessons to everyone - in ordinary schools and homes. That would mean adolescents and others who are extremely aware and self conscious of how they are perceived by their peers would have to loosen up a bit.

One wonders if everyone, all of us, have wild creative propensities, waiting to be unlocked - just like the artists at Creative Growth - but we self censor ourselves.

It would be a huge shift if ordinary folks would move more towards making stuff rather than consuming it.

MoE: Many of the curators we speak to about our project looks at progressive studios like Creative Growth with envy and wish art schools today had that same open-minded vision. They talk about the fact that these are not just schools, they are closer to creative academies for life.

TdM: There is a freedom that comes from not having any expectations, or a need to fulfil a certain model of success. When you have nothing to lose, and someone believes in you, the response can be astounding.

Nothing at Creative Growth comes out of a sophisticated context. Our artists use basic materials on simple tables. It is the sustainability, the repetition, day after day.

I can think of several Creative Growth artists like William Tyler, Dan Miller and Donald Mitchell who are essentially engaged in 30 year long

drawing projects. It is astounding to witness, yet so simple at the same time. It's what they do every day. It's like learning how to speak a language. It's about duration and frequency.

Not everyone has the courage to sit down in front of a blank piece of paper every day, and believe that almost anything is possible. Sometimes the most difficult things take form from a very simple action.

[END]

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