THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

The Museum of Everything is a roaming exhibition of work by people with developmental issues or disabilities that counts Grayson Perry, Nick Cave and Sir Peter Blake among its supporters. This unique show poses fundamental questions about what art is – which is why it is turning the exclusive world of contemporary art on its head.

Words: **Malcolm Jack**

Visit Selfridges in London right now – the ground floor and window spaces of which host Exhibition #4 by The Museum of Everything – and you'll see some remarkable sites: neat rows of miniature multi-coloured fairground bumper car models by Uwe Brecker, cartoonish drawings of squashed wrestlers by Tomoyuki Shinki, ceramic sculpted cameras by Alan Constable and dense weaves of mystifying mathematical formulae by Melvin Way.

If it looks like contemporary art, that's because it is – some of the international artists behind the 400-plus works in Exhibition #4 have sold pieces for several thousands of pounds. And yet, you won't find them in major mainstream galleries because they don't operate in conventional channels of the art world, and perhaps don't even consider what they do to be art at all.

All of them have developmental issues or physical disabilities. Some have experienced homelessness. Which is why The Museum of Everything exists: as a platform and voice for these untrained, so-called 'accidental artists', and as a way of proving that art doesn't always have to be art by design.

It is a voice that has becoming increasingly harder to ignore. With over 200,000 people having visited their three exhibitions to date, and a growing list of well-known supporters that includes Grayson Perry, Nick Cave, Jarvis Cocker, David Byrne and Sir Peter Blake, The Museum of Everything is an emerging force that is ruffling the feathers of the art world and challenging popular preconceptions of who deserves to be described as an artist.

"Who can be privileged with that word?" asks James Brett (pictured below), founder of The Museum of Everything. "Everybody should have the right to be an artist and the right to make art. Yes, we hope they're good – I don't want to enable a world of bad amateur artists. The goal is to say: creativity comes from the most interesting directions."

Brett, whose background is in film-making, was inspired in 2009 to start his "travelling circus" (the museum makes large-scale interventions in temporary spaces) from looking "at a certain type of artwork that it struck me no one was looking at in the UK".

"We're saying to the world: look, these are some of the most creative beings on the planet," adds Brett. "We know mainstream museums are showing you the famous modern artists of our time, but they're missing a beat – these people are fantastic and we'll prove it to you.'"

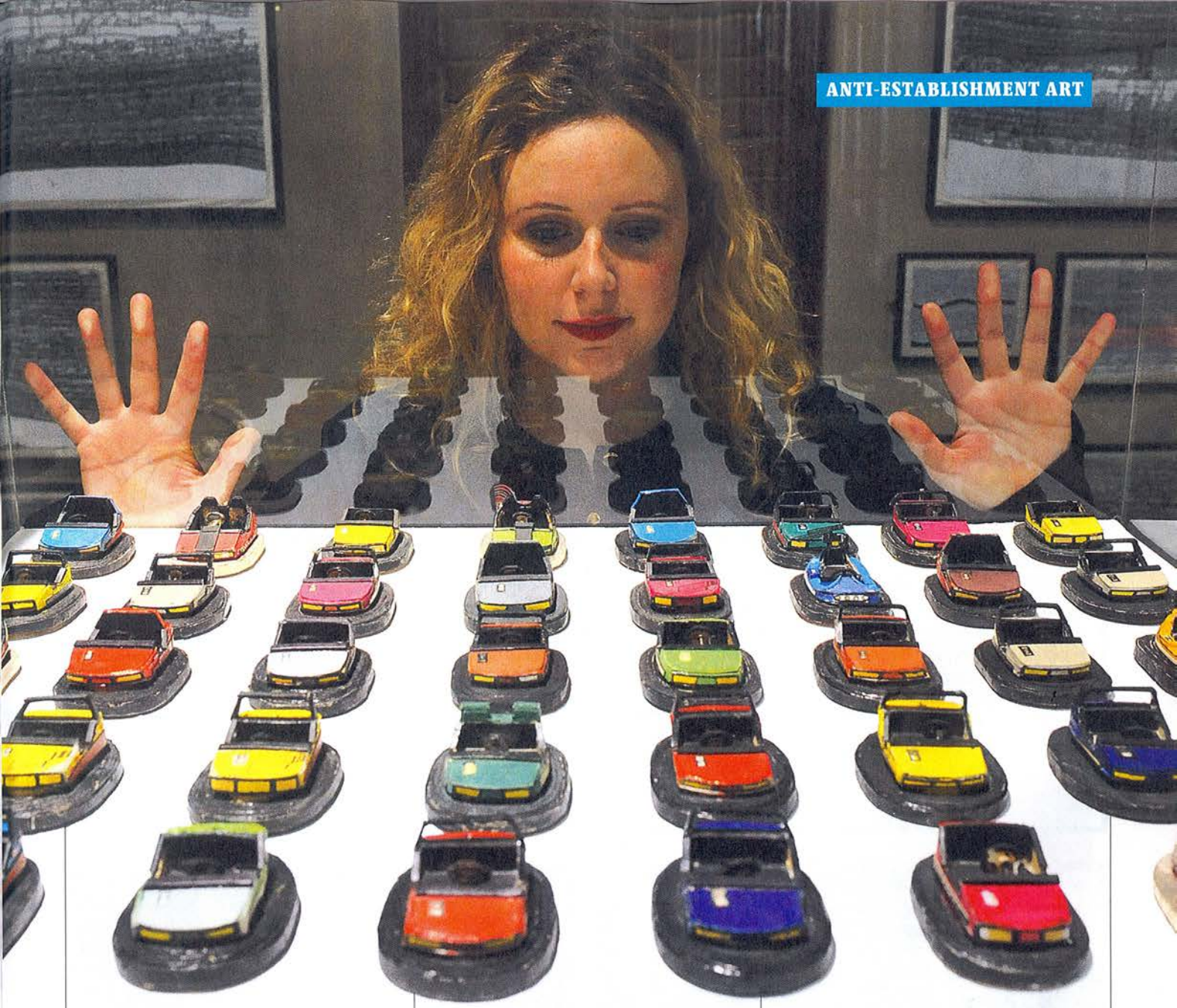
A term you'll frequently hear applied to exhibits in The Museum of Everything is 'outsider art', but it's one that Brett rejects firmly. "It's rude at best; at worst it's bigoted," he stresses. "It's used as a shorthand, and like any shorthand it tends to limit rather than expand. That's why we're called The Museum of Everything."

American artist George Widener, a friend of the museum who took part in a previous exhibition, admits "outsider" is how he could once have been described, "but not anymore". In the 1980s, his struggle with Asperger's syndrome, which wasn't properly diagnosed until the mid-'90s, forced him to drop out of engineering studies in Austin, Texas, to work as a labourer in construction and live in a Salvation Army hostel.

Widener's art has since transformed his life. Based on his savant skill for mathematics and dates – expressed in awe-inspiringly complex collages of numbers, words and images, which once upon a time he would pen in public libraries or on napkins in late-night diners – his drawings have earned him recognition around the world. Widener pieces can sell today for upwards of £16,000.

He gives credit to The Museum of Everything for the way it recognises that an artist's circumstances or condition needn't be what defines them. "I don't try to classify myself, I just try to get on with it," Widener says.

"People can discuss it or whatever – my background or my situation and stuff – but of course I've got to change after having been on the streets." Widener doesn't see mainstream modern



art as something necessarily deserving of reverence. "I would walk by galleries and look in the window by chance," he says, "and I didn't quite understand sometimes what the art was. I'd see something and think – I could do that real easy."

Many of the individuals whose work is exhibited by The Museum of Everything possess a natural talent which every artist craves: a completely unique vision of the world around them and the ability to express it. Melvin Way – whose immersive algorithmic expressions are some of the most popular and intriguing works in Exhibition #4 – is an African-American artist and musician from New York who began developing schizophrenic tendencies as a teenager. He has suffered from bouts of manic depression and spent periods living on the street.

About 20 years ago, Way became involved with HAI, a not-for-profit organisation that helps vulnerable and disadvantaged people get access to the arts – one of many such organisations around the world responsible for supporting and developing real talent. His work is now shown and sold internationally.

Speaking to Way is rather like looking at one of his elliptical creations, which he describes as his endeavour to "search down into the micron and sort things out, per se". He rarely answers questions directly, and peppers his sentences with allusions to "the looking glass," "physiological theorem" and a "subconscious sphere".

'THESE ARE SOME OF THE MOST CREATIVE BEINGS ON THE PLANET'

JAMES BRETT, Founder of The Museum of Everything

But his is clearly a fiercely intelligent mind attempting to express something quite powerful that only he understands. Way's equations are "not to be played around with", as he puts it. Would it make him glad to see his stuff exhibited more widely? "Yeah," he replies, "but it would also frighten me."

The most expansive art exhibition Selfridges has ever hosted will grow further still with a satellite show as part of Frieze Week. Based exclusively on the work of the late Judith Scott, a self-taught American sculptor who, despite deafness and Down's syndrome, made widely celebrated art. This Exhibition #4.1 will inhabit the empty shell of the nearby former Selfridges Hotel. "Tracey Emin, even when she had her show [at Selfridges] it didn't have that scale of immersion," Brett points out.

SEEING ART ANEW UWE BRECKER'S MINI BUMPER CARS: ONE OF THE MANY WORKS AT THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

It's reason enough to believe that The Museum of Everything may be unsettling the major contemporary art museums a little. "We seem to be," Brett agrees, "and that's quite satisfying – but it's not an [aggressive] attack. It's a friendly attack.

"I'm really keen on waking the public up to the work and letting the public make that decision," he adds. "I think if we get the support, that's impossible to ignore. So hopefully the museums see that and we can kind of rattle the cages a bit." ●

More info at www.museumofeverything.com

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