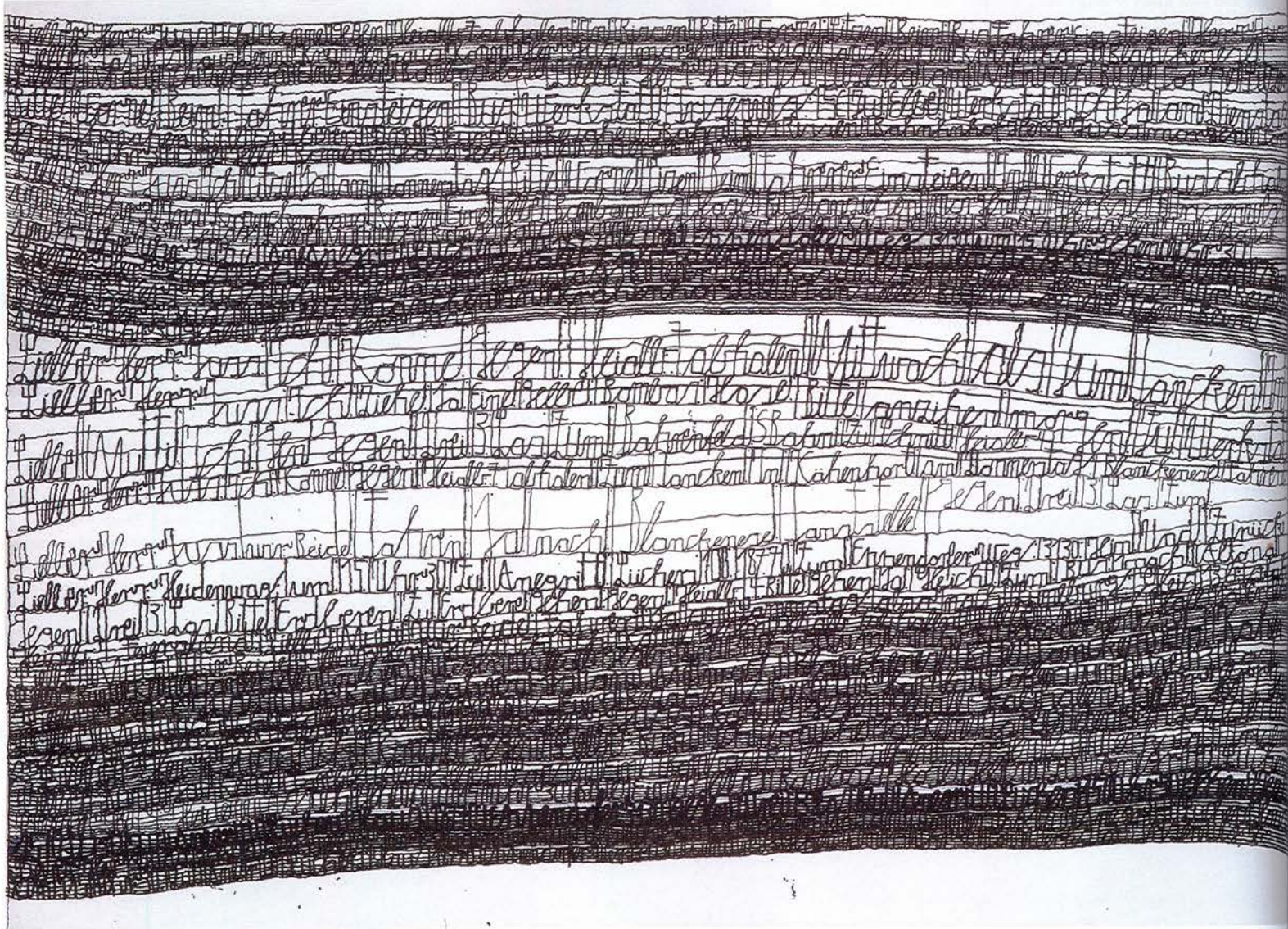


## THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING

The Museum of Everything is an independent art project, curated by the project's founder James Brett. Brett provides a platform for self-taught artists from outside of the art establishment - including folk artists, visionaries and those suffering from mental health issues, to showcase their work. Past displays have included everything from painted portals into the spirit-world to a taxidermied tableaux of woodland critters. *Exhibition #4* opens at 400 Oxford Street (Selfridges) on 2nd September and runs until 25th October. Terry Jones caught up James Brett to discuss art and ability among other things.



### How does Exhibition 4 differ from the previous three?

The first show we did was looking at a wide range of artists I liked artistically and emotionally. All were from different backgrounds. It was a crossover of art brut, folk art and what they call 'outsider' art. It was intended to attract a wide audience and it was done very instinctively. Because it was a success we thought 'how do we evolve this?' It seemed to me that there was a tiny pocket that we hadn't really looked at - which is where artists that no-one gives the time of day to, because they have a developmental disability, work together in progressive workshops. What struck me was, nine times out of ten the work I was seeing from these types of artists was coming out of these unique workshops. The workshops were usually started by artists and allowed anyone with a disability to come in and make their own choices, not to be dictated to or taught how to make art.

**Were you concerned with specific disabilities?** I am of course interested in the difference between the art created by someone with Asperger's Syndrome versus someone with Down Syndrome. But if you focus on the disability, you're ultimately looking at the wrong part, because none

of that matters. The biography isn't relevant. What's relevant is the artwork. I didn't want to focus on disability, I was interested in the workshops, on the partnership between an artist with ability and an artist with disability. It was that process I decided to focus on. There are many workshops out there. The most sophisticated are like private schools, where they choose artists with exceptional ability to work together. Then there's modest ones, which are equally amazing. There's one I went to in Japan, Atelier Hiko, where a mother set up a workshop for her son and some of his friends. It's just a tiny room where they get on with it. But it struck me that this woman had many similarities of approach to Tom di Maria who runs Creative Growth, the most sophisticated workshop in California.

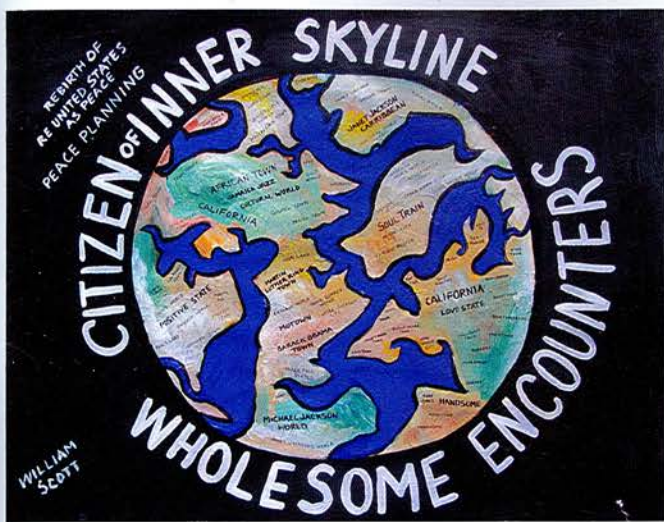
**Are there artists who would never consider themselves as disabled, but are very successful through having a disability?** I've been talking about Yayoi Kusama with the director of Tate Modern, Chris Dercon. She is a successful Japanese artist who voluntarily lives in an institution and who makes paintings of dots; yet that kind of artist is very different from an artist who has a disability that doesn't allow them to function. There

are many shades of grey and if someone has a serious disability, they can't really use it to their advantage. I think it's very important that we like the work. I'm more interested in something that you want to look at, that's meaningful and has an impact on you, than something that's a sympathy vote or a basket made by somebody in a workshop for the handicapped.

**Were you attracted in the work of Michael Gerdsmann before you knew he was blind?** Absolutely, absolutely! You've got to go in there first and say, 'Wow that's astonishing, what is that?' Many blind artists are not going to be good.

**Quite a lot of the artworks you've showed me include writing. Where does your interest in written textures come from?** Lots of the artists in this area feel it's important to tell you what their picture is. I think that comes from feeling that text and image go together - maybe because they want to explain the emotions and feelings connected to the image, maybe because the art is a way of communicating for them. Some of the most interesting cases are those that use an imaginary language, so words that actually don't exist, or letters and alphabets that aren't





Opposite page: Harald Stoffers. Clockwise: William Scott, Dan Miller, Mario Jambresic, Michael Gerdsmann, Masahiko Ooe, Charles Beinhoff and Marianne Schipaanboord.

real. There's a very famous artist, James Castle, who would make books of imaginary typesetting. Or there's Harald Stoffers from Galerie der Villa who writes letters to his mother that say what he's done the last day and the day before and tomorrow. They're real letters, yet he does have a sort of sense of them as more, and he organises them so that they look like musical compositions flying across the page. Paolo Colombo, the curator we worked with for the show in Italy, said that you don't really look at these works - you listen to them.

**So how many pieces are going to be in the new exhibition?** I'm not sure yet, as many as we can cram in! It'll be about 200 I think.

**And how many artists?** I don't know exactly, but 40 or so. We've got our shortlist of artists, the ones we're definitely going to show, but sometimes something else will turn up, and an artist you hadn't thought about just feels right for a room, or a space, or a little cupboard area.

**How much time do you spend travelling around looking for these artists?** Generally I won't go anywhere unless I'm looking for an artist, although occasionally I find one by accident. I went to Beirut, and I'm in an architect's house, and he's got this giant sculpture of a dinosaur

smoking a pipe. You turn a handle and the dinosaur snaps his teeth. So I'm like, 'Oh, what's that?' He says, 'It's by this handyman. I just voted him first prize in this local art competition, although he's not really an artist...' And I say, 'Oh that sounds right up my street.' So off I go to this little place outside Beirut to meet the handyman, Hassan, in his garage. He starts telling me about a perpetual motion machine. It only needs one turn and will carry on forever though a system of cogs and wheels. It shows the evolution of life from the Big Bang onwards, until man walked on the earth. It was a very grand description of a piece, it was really exciting and I couldn't wait to see it. Then he unveils it, and it's a box that's about three feet square, and on the top there's some nylon blue brush, and on the bottom there's long black bits of rope, and there's a handle. And I realise that it's a diorama of the ocean, with these fish and squid and things, all made out of pipe cleaners, sort of flying about. Once in a while the fish will jump though the blue nylon - and this is the perpetual-motion, beginning-of-life machine.

**Amazing!** Actually, you know, it really was quite amazing! You look at it and you go, 'Yeah it is. It is because you've said it is.'

**But you don't want a grant to continue doing this?**

Well that's a good question Terry. I think it's good to be independent. That said, running a museum is an expensive operation. I'm interested in finding out how to make something like The Museum of Everything self-sustaining, without a crutch.

**How many people came through your last exhibition?** 50,000.

**And that was free?** It was free, although we highly encouraged a donation of £3, and I reckon that's reasonable. But if someone can't afford it, then I still believe that the exhibition should be free. When we went to Italy, and actually showed in a museum structure, I wasn't entirely happy that that was a paid experience. We still had a huge number of visitors - 25,000 people came, and that's a lot of money - but I think the culture of free exhibitions is the right one. Art should be by the people for the people.  
musevery.com