

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Elisabeth Telsnig**

Dr Elisabeth Telsnig

b 1953 (Graz, Austria)

Art historian Dr Elisabeth Telsnig PhD has been working with mentally disabled people in the Lebenshilfe Oberösterreich for over 15 years. Since 1997 she has been the mentor of artist Josef Hofer. Exhibitions of his work include the Galerie Christian Berst, Paris (2011) and Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne (2003). Her publications on Hofer include *Unlocking the Human Form, Raw Vision 55* (2006) and *Eward 2004: Josef Hofer, Robert Burda and Florival Candeias* (2004).

[START]

MOE: **Elisabeth**, can you tell me a bit about the artist you work with, **Josef Hofer**. When he makes a piece of work, what is he doing?

ET: He is drawing, just like any artist. For him it's like chopping wood or being out in the fields, it's a job. He draws here in the institution during the day and when I'm in the room with him.

Josef comes from a farming background. They used to get up in the morning for work and go to bed when it was done. He is doing what he feels he has to do.

Josef has to draw. Sometimes he even forgets to eat lunch and go home. He is deaf, so this causes all sorts of problems. For example, 15 minutes before lunch, I have to stop him and indicate it's time to eat. When the social workers come to take him home, they arrive half an hour early, because he never wants to stop. He only stops to go to the toilet - and even then he does it in a hurry!

Josef is so proud when he finishes a drawing. There are around ten people working in my studio and he shows his work to all of them, then lets me take the drawing to be inventorised and sold.

MOE: Do you encourage **Josef**, do you work with him?

ET: I remain completely in the background. I try not to influence him and do not press him or try to get a result.

MOE: So what is your background? How did you take on this role?

ET: I am an art historian. I was visiting three institutions for one day every week. When I met **Josef** and saw his pictures I was very surprised. It was not something I had expected. They were amazing and they stayed in my mind. But they were not considered precious by his family and the institution just threw them away. I collected them because I was scared that if I came back the following week, they'd no longer be there. The fact that I kept them is something which changed **Josef**. You can see it in his work.

MOE: Could you talk about the difference between the person you met at the beginning and the person **Josef** is now?

ET: There's a big difference. In the beginning he was almost invisible, reclusive and withdrawn. He did not make contact with people because he had experienced such hardship in his life.

Josef was very closed and felt he was disturbing people. The people in the institution did not respect his private space. They would take things out of his bags and he would become angry and irritated. Josef doesn't own much; so the few things he does have are precious to him, even if they're just newspaper cuttings. The people in the institution always wanted to clean up and throw away things that were important to him. They treated him like a child.

The truth is that you have to give someone like Josef unconditional love, just as you would to a husband, a wife or a child. You have to make sure they know that what they are doing is okay, which is why I always accepted Josef, as a person and as an artist. I left him alone to make his art and gradually he became more confident.

MOE: That must be connected to the respect somebody like Josef deserves and needs.

ET: Yes, this is a very important point. You have to give an artist the freedom to be himself.

MOE: What fascinates me is that someone like Josef can express himself creatively and make great work. To make that happen, all it takes is an enabler who understands that it's not therapy, it's art.

ET: Absolutely. I am not a therapist, I am a theorist, an art historian. I am certainly not able to draw and paint.

MOE: I think this is your greatest asset.

ET: I know this!

MOE: Tell me about what it is Josef depicts. I wasn't sure what I was looking at when I first encountered it, the sexuality made me slightly uncertain. Then you explained it to me.

ET: In Josef's work you usually have two people. Both are self-portraits: one is Josef himself, the other is his reflection in his mirror. One is active, the other is not.

What the active Josef is doing is masterbating. Masturbation is something very special in his life. For him it's like eating or drinking - it makes his life better, it's a passion.

Josef masturbates at home, in his room in front of his mirror. He then draws this from memory. What is important to understand is that these

are not erotic drawings, they cannot be read like the work of **Egon Schiele**. These are **Josef**'s autobiography.

I sometimes ask him what he is drawing, whether it is urination or masturbation. He shows me with his fingers what he means – and unlike most men, who are weak after they ejaculate, **Josef** reveals that he is very strong and proud. This is absolutely fascinating.

I have been discussing **Josef**'s work with an art historian here. My instinct is that there have never been drawings like this in art history or even a human image presented like this before. I personally think it is quite unique.

MOE: Let's talk about the frames. They are astonishing grids of yellow and orange. I was of the understanding that they might be a visual memory of **Josef**'s previous activity of basket-weaving or that they somehow represented the frame around his bedroom mirror.

ET: In the beginning his figures were unframed. As he became more confident, the frames emerged. Today if you were to show him any drawing, he would immediately put a frame around it.

For him, they seem to represent a form of security. **Professor Wilhelm Schmidt** at the **University of Art** in **Berlin** has described them as architecture. Personally I think they aren't structural, they are more like a cavity – like a mother's body.

MOE: Interpretation is complicated from my perspective. If an artist can't communicate verbally, it is easy to project onto the work. I am inclined to understand the work literally, without symbolism.

I've noticed that sometimes **Josef** repeats the same image three or four times. Can you tell me about that?

ET: He will make variations until it's done. When he has it, he stops. You certainly can't stop him any time before then or he'll get really angry. But once he has stopped, that's it – he won't repeat that image anymore. I look at it like **Giacometti**, all the same images in hundreds of variations until the artist has it.

MOE: From the high to the low, the artistic practice is one of success, failure and repetition. You said **Josef** looks at this like a job. Most good artists I know also do it like a job, they come in, sit down and even if they don't feel like doing it, they do it.

Everything you talk about confirms an artistic practice. What would be your advice to someone working with an artist like Josef?

ET: At first I only gave Josef coloured pencils and paper. Most artists with disabilities draw, they don't paint. It can take a long time, two years or more, because young people coming out of school struggle to work creatively. Sometimes I'll get one picture which reveals the soul of that person, followed by 20 which aren't nearly as interesting. It can take a long time for someone to open up and I know some of them will never be artists. To be honest, I have only ever encountered one real artist in my life - and that was Josef. The others have talent; but they are not great artists like him.

MOE: So how do you decide if someone is an artist or not?

ET: I don't decide. Josef came over me like a wave. I had no choice.

MOE: There is an argument that says that they are all artists, but some are better than others.

ET: For me an artist must have a very individual and singular style, I have to recognise that it is unique.

MOE: This is the same for Dr Johann Feilacher. I personally believe they are all artists, that one can't make a choice. The nature of creativity is such that if we are going to accept the intention to create as a definition of an artistic practice, then we also have to accept it for everybody. Whether we like it, whether we think it is good, is something else; and the quality and subjective appreciation is on a very different scale than the acceptance of it as art.

ET: Many people paint like other artists. Others are special and have a singular style. These are the real artists for me.

I know many handicapped people who create and I have never seen someone like him. My friends have no interest in art, but as soon as they see one of Josef's pictures they recognise it immediately.

This for me is art.

[END]

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