



OUT OF THIS WORLD

Now that it's so popular, can Outsider art still be considered 'outsider'?
By Charlotte Philby



THE MUSEUM OF Everything's latest instalment - Exhibition #4 - is being held in the basement of London's Selfridges store, and with

no small fanfare. For two months, until the exhibition closes on 25 October, all 27 windows overlooking Oxford Street will be totally product-free for the first time ever. Instead, shoppers filing through the West End will be met by huge pop-colour heads and blown-up doodles, taken from the art display downstairs.

For the show itself, the department store's swish Ultralounge has been transformed into a labyrinth of tiny rooms and alcoves - which have been given a dubiously primitive make-over for the occasion with fake crumbling walls and exposed brickwork - and stuffed floor-to-

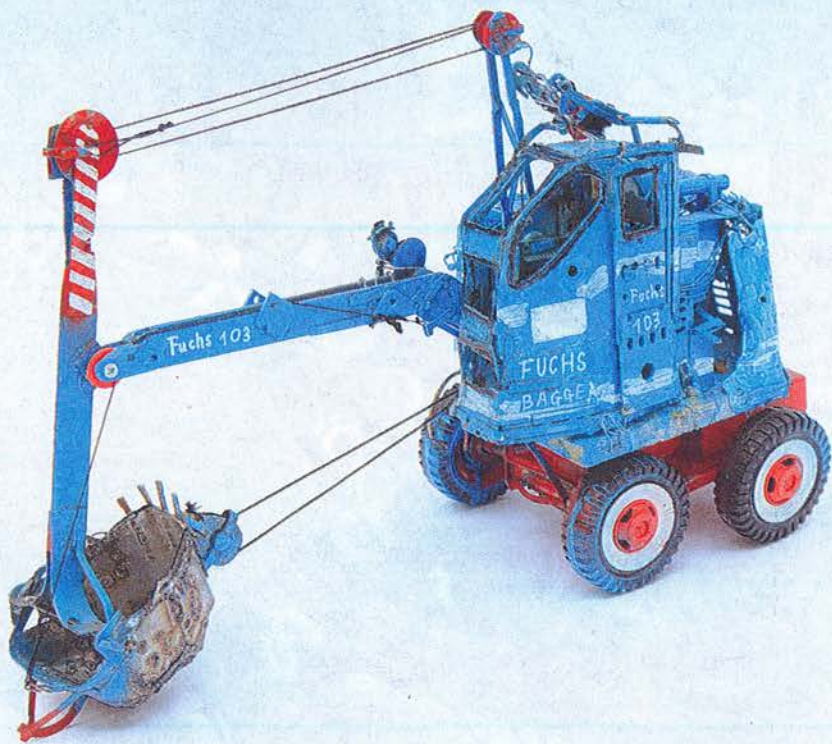
ceiling with paintings, sculpture, crochet, and hanging mobiles. A series of neon-green, papier mâché Frankenstein heads looms over the doorway, and a sign greets bemused tourists: "Dear Window Shopper, The Museum of Everything is Britain's first, only & most successful space for the unintentional, untrained & undiscovered artists of the modern world". Though, unless you've just stepped off a plane from Bermuda, you probably know that by now.

James Brett, a British art collector, launched the Museum of Everything in 2009. The first exhibition took place in a dilapidated recording studio on a side street in Primrose Hill and was declared a hands-down success. Critics swooned; Brett persuaded Jarvis Cocker, Peter Blake and Nick Cave to guest-curate follow-up shows, which featured in every

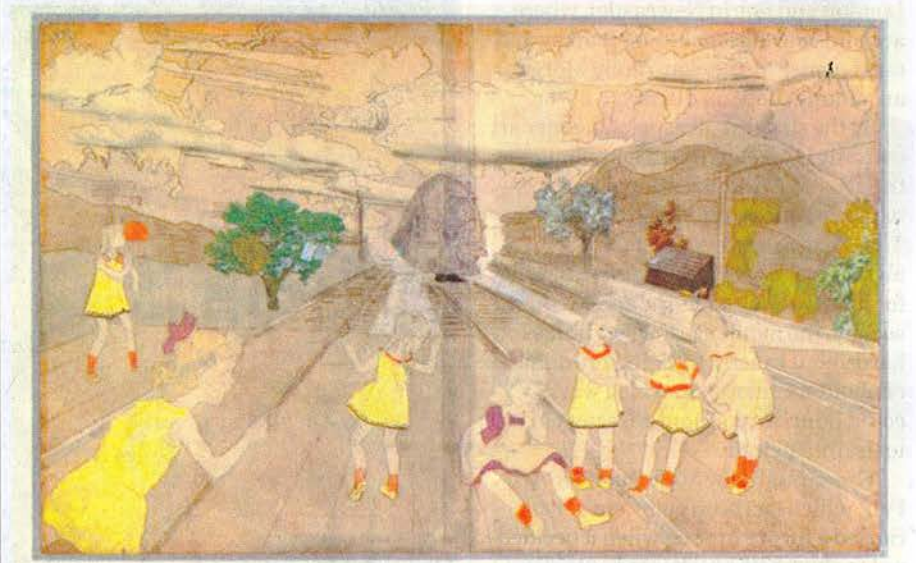
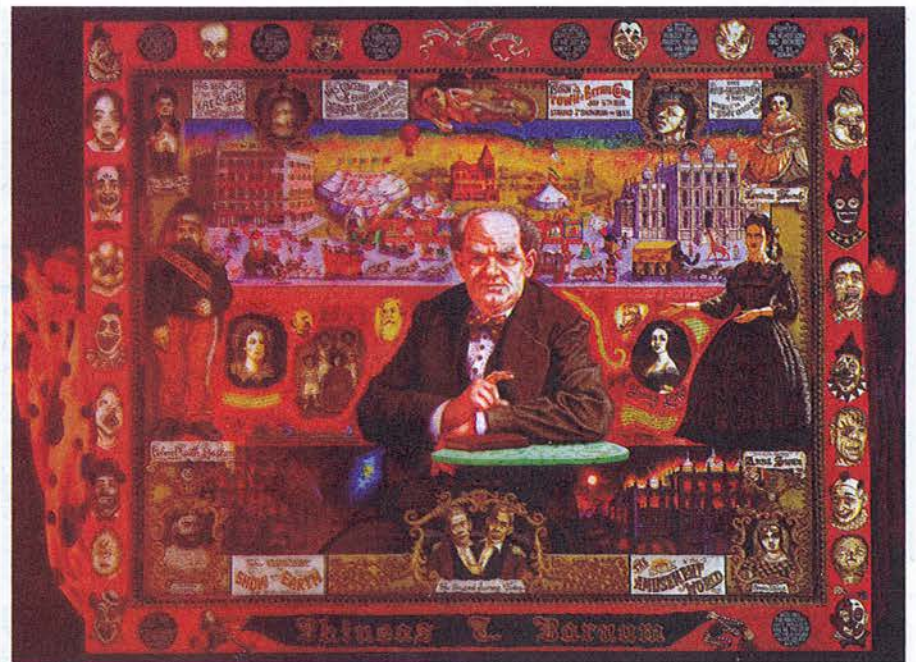
newspaper, blog and arts journal in the land, amassing the Museum of Everything legions of fans along the way.

All was going very nicely indeed, with Brett building his collection of Outsider art into a powerful brand, when things started to go slightly awry with this latest project. The mention of their favourite show being moved into bed with one of the world's biggest superstores had disgruntled fans snarling "sell-out". Brett has defended the collaboration, at one point describing Selfridges in an online statement as "pioneers" for understanding "the truth, humanity and beauty of this work when so many others do not".

Cosying up with a major retailer, Brett tells us, is actually part of his ongoing mission to bring the outside in. With a little help from some friends, he is shaking up the establishment, throwing into



Opposite page: an Outsider piece by Paulus de Groot. Above: a piece by Roland Kappel. Below: a sculpture by Masami Yamagiwa



Top: a work by Outsider artist Joe Coleman. Above: *Untitled*, by Henry Darger



question the way we look at and define art in Britain. But what exactly is Outsider art? And does it really stand to gain from its recent turn in the limelight?

The term Outsider art was originally coined in 1972 by the English critic Roger Cardinal. This was our equivalent to Art Brut, a term invented some 30 years earlier by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe works by prison inmates and mental patients. Beyond that, it's all a bit hazy. Try googling Outsider art, and within a couple of clicks you'll find yourself in a mind-boggling maze of 'neuve invention', folk art, marginal art, visionary art, naïve art, dysfunctional art.

American literary scholar Terry Castle joined the debate this summer with an article for the *London Review of Books* in which he struggled to get to grips with "the gorgeous, disorientating, sometimes

repellent phenomenon, Outsider art". Castle concludes, after some deliberation, that "[it] is best defined as art produced by those, who if not officially classed as 'insane' or institutionalised, are in some way mentally or socially estranged from, well... the rest of us".

THE LATE Jean Dubuffet, himself an acclaimed painter and sculptor, would not have approved of James Brett's attempts to bring Outsider art to the masses. The largely self-trained Frenchman was defensive of Art Brut, deeming it the purest art of all. In order to protect its

OUTSIDER ART DEALS IN THE PURELY EMOTIONAL

purity, he said it needed to be defined and contained so as to avoid contamination from contemporary art, which he branded a vacuous pollutant. And for decades, things had been going his way.

For as long as we've had the term Outsider art, it has existed largely in a discrete space. So distinct, says John Maizels, editor of *Raw Vision*, the leading magazine on the subject, that in itself "it cannot even be considered a movement". Maizels explains, "but each outsider artist is a movement in itself". It is as much about the experience of the artist as it is their work - crucially, the outsider's experience which in some way deviates from the norm.

Like that of Richard Dadd, a Victorian painter who spent much of his life in an asylum after stabbing his father to death in a park and fleeing to France - in order

to assassinate Ferdinand I the Emperor of Austria, so he later claimed. Dadd's life and work has proved so endlessly fascinating that just this year it has been deconstructed in a new book, *Richard Dadd: The Artist and the Asylum*, a play, *The Demon Box* at the Finborough Theatre, and an exhibition at The Orleans House Gallery in Twickenham.

Or the enigmatic Henry Darger - the ultimate Outsider pin-up - a Chicago-based janitor-cum-illustrator whose intricate panoramas of deformed school-girls struck the perfect balance of genius and weirdo. As the late Tom Lubbock, *The Independent's* celebrated art critic noted in his review of the Museum of Everything's Exhibition #1, which showcased some of Darger's work: "If [his] perversity wasn't so eccentric, his work might attract the interest of the →

AP: SYLVAIN DELEU

police... What's so strange about Darger, of course, is that he isn't trying to be. He's trying to tell his story."

Darger's work is celebrated in a permanent collection at Chicago's Intuit centre. Outsider art is marked in various highly-respected institutions in the States, like the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. With no such gallery to speak of in Britain, we're years behind the States, says John Maizel of *Raw Vision*, which though UK-based, gets most of its 9,000 readers from the international market. "Interest in Outsider art in this country," he adds, "has been a long time coming."

On its website, *Raw Vision* refers to Outsider artists as "unknown geniuses ... who invent their own forms, techniques and create private worlds". Against this test we can discount the works in collector Steve Lazarides' Outsider Galleries (he has two in London and one in Newcastle), where acclaimed artists including Banksy and taxidermist-to-the-stars Polly Morgan are among those on display.

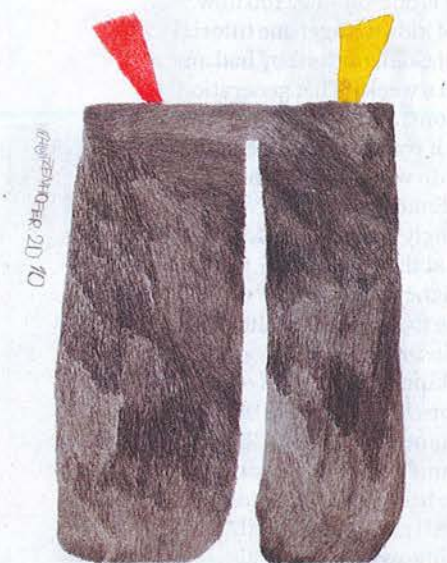
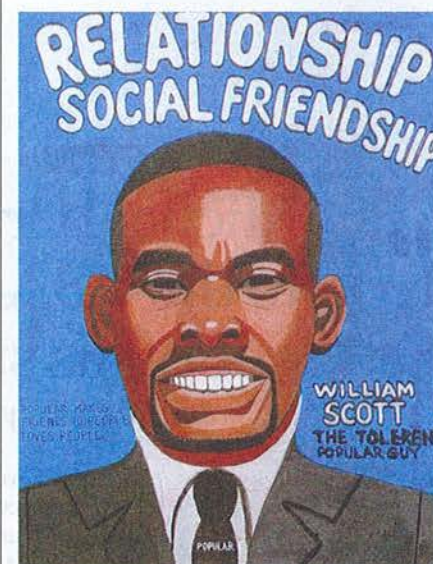
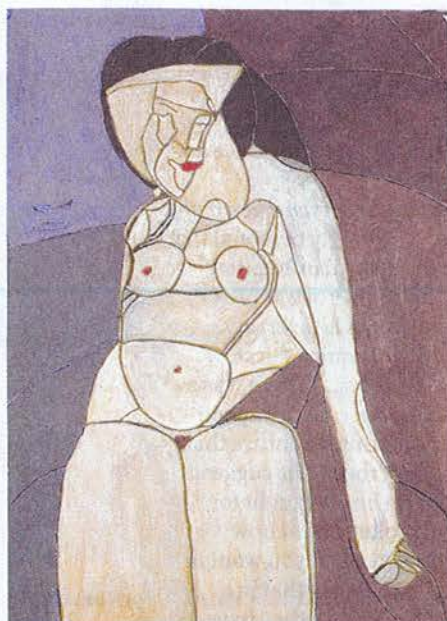
By the strictest measure, Outsider art can only be deemed such for as long as the artist is – in conventional terms – unsuccessful. Authenticity is key. There has to be a certain lack of self-awareness in an artist's work in order for it be truly 'outside' the confines of society; the moment an artist thinks too hard about exactly what they're doing, or about the market in which work could flourish, you start to teeter close to the inner circle.

The annual New York Outsider Art Fair, which has been going since 1993, caused a furore in 2002 when it decided not to show self-proclaimed outsider artist Joe Coleman (whose world-famous studies include outlaws and serial killers). Organisers reportedly felt Coleman was too much in the business of making money – collectors of his detailed, supernatural-themed portraits include Johnny Depp and Iggy Pop.

The artist Peter Blake agrees that authenticity is a matter for growing concern among those interested in Outsider art. A collector of the genre from the age of 14 (he bought a papier mâché tray and a painting of Queen Mary) Blake says that the quality and integrity of Outsider art is bound to suffer with increased exposure, if for one simple reason: "There are people who now know the interest exists, and will make pseudo-Outsider art to fit the category".

Having agreed to curate the third Museum of Everything show, Blake concedes that he is partly to blame for "making too public" something which





Opposite: *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke* by Richard Dadd. Top: *Untitled* by Irene Gerard. Above: by Gunther Schützenhöfer

Clockwise, from left: a Selfridges window; Richard Dadd; a William Scott work; an issue of *Raw Vision*

by its very definition belongs to a place away from the public gaze. He is wary, also, of attempts to intellectualise and anatomise this work too closely: "That is to make academic something which, by its very nature, should just happen".

LIKE THE old French master Jean Dubuffet, James Brett believes in the sanctity of Outsider art: "Contemporary art often deals in ideological statements or conceptual ideas," he says, "whereas this deals in something purely emotional." It was this that originally drew him to American folk art, which is where his collection started: "It was unpretentious, very immediate and seemed to be quite truthful; there's not so much highfalutin, because it emanates from people who don't consider themselves to be artists."

But unlike Dubuffet, this enthusiastic curator says public attention is exactly what Outsider art needs. For Exhibition #4 he has collaborated with various international studios, predominantly in the US, Japan and Western Europe such as Creative Growth in Oakland, California, where "artists with disabilities have an opportunity to tell their story, to show their work locally and internationally and to potentially make a living as an artist".

By pulling together artists who are not ordinarily represented in the major

IT'S ART, MENTALLY OR SOCIALLY ESTRANGED FROM US

galleries and bringing them to the masses in a great big glitzy public show, he says he is helping to democratise art; providing a public platform for those who are otherwise marginalised, and battling against the view of Outsider work as a lower form of culture.

"These artists are not generally visible to the world because there's been a resistance from mainstream institutions to them." It is these very same galleries and museums, he says, that "define what art is for the rest of us".

It's for similar reasons that Brett takes umbrage with the very term Outsider, because "it assumes there is an outside and an inside, and that we can safely assume that we know what art is". Instead, he prefers to use words like "unintentional" and "untrained".

Though one wonders what difference that really makes. If we really are intent on shaking things up, we need to go further than just challenging a terminology.

In fact, Gregor Muir, director of the ICA, asks whether it's useful to try to distinguish between Outsider art and 'insider' art at all: "Approaching it from afar, it becomes all too easy to get sucked into the difference between good and bad, or art and non-art, artist or amateur". Rather, he suggests, it's important we concentrate on widening our cultural brackets: "Clearly the notion of normal art, produced by normal artists, needs to be challenged".

A (self-published) book accompanying the show, *The Museum of Everything: Exhibition #4*, is available at shopevery.com, £45

CORBIS, REX FEATURES, ANDREW MEREDITH