

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Adam Phillips**

Adam Phillips

b 1954 (Cardiff, Wales)

Adam Phillips is a child psychologist, psychoanalyst, literary critic and writer. Principal child psychotherapist at Charing Cross Hospital, London (1977/1995), he is a regular contributor to the London Review of Books and a frequent essayist on philosophy and psychoanalysis. Phillips is the author of many books, including *Monogamy* (1996), *Side Effects* (2006) and *On Balance* (2010).

[START]

MoE: I wondered if we could discuss the nature of ability and disability in relation to the artists in our current show at **The Museum of Everything**. My starting point is that a significant proportion of them do not articulate a specific artistic intention.

AP: When you say they don't show intent, do you mean they can't formulate an intention, but they can do something in the process of working?

MoE: Rather that they may not conceive of art or the role of an artist as you or I do.

AP: Who are the artists you're referring to exactly?

MoE: Generally they are artists with developmental disabilities. I'm talking about a very specific group within the area which is often referred to as outsider art. I am talking less about those with general mental health issues and more about those with learning difficulties and where there may be a communication problem.

AP: In a sense, they're being offered the opportunity to do something that we might call art afterwards, but they - from their point of view - are just being offered the opportunity to make something.

MoE: Correct.

AP: With no directive at all?

MoE: Generally speaking, yes. Non-direction is an important issue because the resulting forms and structures are more interesting and seem more directly to reflect their experiences and perceptions.

The most well-known example I can think of is **Judith Scott**. She had **Down Syndrome**, was rescued from an institution and placed into an art workshop in **California** called **Creative Growth**. After two years of doing very little, a few drawings, she started creating giant sculptures out of yarn and found materials. She would use things she found in the workshop and wrap them. When you see these sculptures, you're immediately moved and engaged. By the time you hear the story you realise these are her words. The curator **Matthew Higgs** describes them as some of the most important sculptures

of the 20th Century because they are beyond art, or certainly beyond that very narrow definition of art which exists right now.

AP: Is your assumption that by now, at least historically or not, art – as in the art market, the world of artists and the idea of art – is self-inhibiting or too directive?

MoE: In many ways. However I am specifically interested in understanding why these artists are not privileged within the mainstream terminology and exhibition of art.

AP: The terminology itself is a problem?

MoE: In my view the problem is so substantial that everybody acknowledges it and does nothing about it.

AP: In terms of a parallel with what I do, it may be obvious to you but, when somebody comes to see a psychoanalyst, there is no directive. You're being encouraged or invited to say whatever comes into your mind. It's not as though I've got an idea beforehand of what you should be saying, I couldn't possibly know that. All I can do is provide a situation where you can say whatever you like. Then I can do one of two things: I can re-describe what you say and show you where you might not be able to continue freely speaking and speculate why that might be.

With this question of it being non-directive, I would wonder if it's possible for something to be non-directive. Even if the directive is non-directive, my prejudice is that somebody making something is always responding to some demand somewhere, even if they don't know what it is. Even if someone's not telling them to make art, it comes from either an imaginary or a real relationship in which there's a demand. Somebody wants someone to be something. Somebody wants somebody else to make something for them. It may be that in their developmental history, it's precisely this which has been a problem.

MoE: The issue of destination may be connected to this. Much of art comes into existence with a destination in mind, be it the audience, the market or the museums. That's why the so-called outsider and self-taught area is fascinating – the strongest work is often the most private, made effectively for its creator only.

There is a handicapped artist in **Austria** called **Josef Hofer**. He was basket-weaving in his institution and his behaviour was becoming problematic. An art historian working in the institution noticed he was creatively talented and gave him coloured pens and paper. He started to draw and his work soon turned into astonishingly dense portraits, orange and yellow lattice-work frames reminiscent of the baskets yet with two figures in the middle, often naked, one usually masturbating, the other one touching the first.

The first time you see these works is unsettling, you can't quite work out what is going on. In fact they are self-portraits: one figure is the mirror image of the other. It's him, masturbating in front of his bedroom mirror. It is an unedited visual autobiography and something a contemporary artist would be unlikely to produce.

Everything about **Josef Hofer** strikes me as an artistic practice: he's obsessed by his work, only when he completes an idea will he move on to another, he has to be interrupted to eat or go to the toilet, he is proud of his work, he shows it to his mentor, he has so many of habits of an artist, but he doesn't have any destination in mind - or at least, I assume he does not - apart from the making of the thing there and then. Although his mentor has given him the materials, there's no obligation for him to do anything. He wants to do it, he lives to do it, it is his job.

Progressive workshops do not take a purist art brut approach. They give their artists materials and encouragement. They don't push, they let the person be with other people making things. If they want to make, they make; if they don't, they don't.

In the best situations, there is no input, or not substantially so; and for me, the results reflect the creative language all of us have from birth. These artists must make something, they must create; and when they do, it acknowledges not the romance of creation, but the factual pre-lingual need to create - a need any creative person has.

AP: As if there's a wish to make oneself known or a wish to make that pre-dates everything else?

MoE: A need, not a wish. A wish evidenced in the fact of creation.

AP: In your sense of this, does the need have any purpose beyond itself?

MoE: I wouldn't know.

AP: It wouldn't matter in the terms of what you're thinking of?

MoE: It might have a purpose to someone else. I think that's where my interest in the definition comes in.

AP: My thought in the middle of this is: what's the relationship between making and sociability? I can see the point and value of there being no pre-ordained destination and that the destination is discovered in the making. The other part that interests me, apart from the fact that people make things in these circumstances, is what if anything this means for them in terms of their link or lack of it with other people? In other words, are they in any sense doing what we may think of as trying to make a better life for themselves? Are they hoping that somebody will get it even if they don't? Is something being invited or addressed? Is there a wish that someone will respond? This thing they've made is not in a void.

MoE: It varies between individuals. We have filmed several studios across **Europe**. When we film, these artists ignore us, they are almost all in the zone, completely involved in what they are doing. The community aspect to it is important to many of the workshops. One artist encourages and sometimes influences the other. I've also been to workshops where individuals work alone in a solitary zone.

AP: Is there a risk with this kind of work that the individual maker repeats themselves and there's little innovation?

MoE: Quite often there is one main aesthetic idea, I could call that a style. I can certainly think of many contemporary artists with only one style...**Rothko** didn't develop more than twice!

AP: I suppose the question should be whether the repetition goes on feeling as if it's alive. Obviously everyone who does this stuff has an idiom. There's something characteristic about what they're doing which is inevitable and repeated. But there would be repetitions that would bore the maker, not to mention the audience, and other repetitions that would feel urgent and necessary.

MoE: There are many artists whose work is urgent and necessary. If they're bored they stop. If I take the example of **Josef Hofer**, each and

every work is fascinating because even if there are repetitions, each has its own nuance. I read this work quite instinctively, so I see this variation, creative invention and discovery – which are of course the same abstract notions and words that we use when we are dealing with creative thought exhibited by any artist.

In short I believe that *art* as we currently understand it ought to encapsulate this creative process. Yet right now it doesn't seem to do so, either philosophically or curatorially. I am trying to work out why.

AP: I think at least two things. One is that it might be important not to know what you're doing; that might be central to it. The other is that there are lots of questions, like the fact that we are all developmentally disabled in some way. There's not an *us* and *them*. Some people are more visibly functional, but everybody's going to feel this, to identify with a so-called disabled person with a capacity and urge to make things. It seems very likely to be true, although this is just my impression, that one is most likely to make something out of a place in oneself for that which feels most disfigured, most disabled, most at a loss and that the making has something to do with the feeling of helplessness or at-a-lossness.

The other thing that is important is to do with how much the making is part of the wish to make a link with others and how much it's a solitary endeavour. That seems to me to be to do with the question of art and an audience, of how much of a communal project art is.

In collective dreaming seminars, a group of people who don't know each other go away for a weekend and there is non-authoritative authority figure. The group sleeps for a night and comes back together in the morning to describe their dreams. Then the group associate to the dreams. There's no authoritative interpretation of the dreams, the figure is not telling what they mean, he's just one among the group. The project is how everybody associates to everybody else's dreams. Things emerge out of that. There's no wish for a final conclusive story of any dream, just a collective engagement with collective production. A man called **Gordon Lawrence**, has discovered that over a period of time it appears as though the group have a shared project or problem that they're working on. Yet what's crucial is that there's not an authoritative dream interpreter. If you have one, the process does not work. It requires the sense that everybody is in this together.

With what you're describing it would be interesting to know what the nature of the togetherness is in these workshops. How much is soliloquy and how much is dialogue or conversation? If you give people sufficient space and time and a sympathetic environment, they make something. My guess is it's words. For children it's drawings.

I assume two things. One is that people are very frightened of each other and this is inhibiting; and when they're less frightened they have a wish to make things. So how do you create the conditions in which people who apparently have a limited facility or willingness to communicate suddenly start making? Why might they be doing this? You can force interpretations on that, but the most interesting thing would be their account - and very often they can't give an account. You create certain conditions and people do things. They can do a million things, but in fact they make things. That's very telling, but I don't know what it's telling us.

MoE: Apart from the fear element, which I hadn't taken as a factor but clearly is inherent, what you have said reflects the opinions of every leader of every great workshop. They all say: time, sympathy, support, space, along with materials. I've seen people make incredible work instinctively in the tiniest workshops. They treat it as a routine. It's a safe haven for them.

Yet there are few great studios in this country. That may be because of our obsession with therapy. It's eliminated the ability to let the creativity take over; which is why I want to try to understand what these artists are making and what is actually going on.

AP: I'd have a more reductive psychoanalytical view of this. I'd start with whatever else we are, that is to say, we are creatures with needs which are ineluctable. The communication of our needs are partly at odds with our sociability, in other words, there are needs we have and things we want that threaten the relationships we also need. I imagine one of the reasons we create what we call art is as a way of representing the more difficult nature of what we need and desire. It has to be because we ourselves do not understand it. It requires elaborate forms and formalisations and the reason making is urgent is because our survival literally depends upon it. That something has to be addressed to another person is essential to our being. If this is not communicated, we die.

When you describe **Judith Scott** who for ages did not and then eventually did create something extraordinary, the story is both inspiring and true, because it suggests a history of unreceptive listeners. It's as though, over a period of time, a person begins to feel their group or environment is sympathetic and on their side. It's as if the group implicitly says: *we've got an appetite to know something about you that matters to you.* It's not consciously thought like this, but that's the effect. In that atmosphere, this person begins to want to make things and in the making they discover the elaboration of their wish to make. The making, however disguised or complicated, is a communication of need, not so that an authoritative person like me can come along and explain what it means, but rather that the important thing might be the making of it and the fact that it's subject to a diversity of interpretations.

Lots of people can make different things out of this; but the maker is the one who decides which one they like. No authority or institution can come along and determine what it means, they can only describe what it invokes in them.

MoE: That resonates and strikes me as particularly true. When we did our shows at **The Museum of Everything**, we didn't put biography on the walls to avoid this same issue.

AP: Biography is pre-emptive, it's as though they've given you a position to tell the truth.

MoE: One of the problems with this genre is that people tend to project. If we take the example of **Judith Scott**, the photograph that circulates is one of her holding a large sculpture, which we read as her lost twin. We seem to project that meaning onto it, although this is just a projection, an interpretation on the artist's behalf.

AP: I can see that. The other risk is when there's tyrannical parents around who tell you what everything means. It would be unfortunate to get caught up with that, because there can be no authoritative interpretation of anything. It doesn't mean that some interpretations might not be more useful or inspiring than others. People can only project - some projections are just more interesting and some more stultifying.

MoE: I project all the time.

AP: Of course, what else can we do?

MoE: This may particularly be to do with the history surrounding this genre. Doctors originally brought it to the attention of the art world as the creativity of the insane. When **Dubuffet** celebrated it, it took on a new name -*art brut*. Today many artists are passionate about it and draw from its aesthetic, like **Grayson Perry**, who is also a vocal supporter of the work. Yet at the same time, there is often a suggested difference, an *us* and a *them*. My feeling is that this segregation is unjustified. The work these artists do is often better, because they don't think about *art*.

AP: Do you want to think they do it better or do you want to think they're doing something else?

MoE: I believe whether good or bad - because that's a separate discussion - what they do is the beginning of art, it's almost more powerful than art. Yet at the same time, language is not allowing them in, because *art* demands a formal intention. Which is perhaps why the museums don't show it.

AP: Are you then not involved in a semi-political project of wanting to change a consensus?

MoE: It's in there somewhere; but I wouldn't want to do it just to please myself!

AP: I wasn't suggesting you did. There's a real reason to do it, which is to enable people to see these things. You think that these works are valuable and interesting; but they're only going to be seen if the consensus is changed.

MoE: If the people are privileged, then the art will be privileged. If the art is privileged, then the art will be accepted. If the art is accepted, then it will be curated and it will be seen.

AP: Is that a process you want to enter into more effectively?

MoE: **The Museum of Everything** seems already to be doing it, although we didn't realise that was what we were doing. The idea that these artists can't be presented, or if they can, then only as something else, like an artefact or ritual object, seems incorrect.

There are few progressive workshops in this country. If there was one in every borough, every town, artists with learning difficulties would have greater community and purpose. It isn't happening because this work is not respected, the word *art* has shackled it.

AP: In order for this to change, people would have to have a very different picture of disability and developmental problems. One of the great things about art is that it provides an opportunity for us to redeem ourselves in the most tremendous ways. Someone may be a very unhappy or deranged person, but when he or she produces this thing called art, the art redeems everything.

It would be better to live in a world where people didn't think of there being the disabled and the rest. It would be better to say we are all disabled, which clearly we are, and that it takes different forms, but that our culture encourages some forms of disability and discourages others. It is more frightened of some than it is of others and wants to trivialise or marginalise those others.

For example, **Down Syndrome** people are significantly discriminated against. There might be lots of reasons for this, but they are. The interesting questions are: why is that so; and what is our picture of a good life and a bad life? It might be as simple as saying that people are supposed to be beautiful, grow up, be physically co-ordinated. So if you're not one of those, you've had your chips.

This is extraordinary, astounding actually, but it's common sense. What you're doing touches on many powerful issues along the lines of who we are prepared to listen to. The answer is: not many people.

MoE: It perhaps depends on who *we* is. We opened the museum knowing that the name -**The Museum of Everything**- was silly. It represented a conundrum, an impossibility, yet it also encompassed an idea of inclusion, it was understood by our artists, our audience, even by children.

We've had 200,000 people come so far and I am hoping the new show will double that number. If the *we* are the people that come, the ones who are interested and prepared to listen, then those boundaries may shift.

AP: I'm sure that's right and I'm sure that's the opportunity. There's real pleasure here potentially.

MoE: That's why **Selfridges** seems an ideal venue. If we can put this work in the windows, even if the audience don't make it downstairs to the show, they will have seen a version on the street.

It feels to me that nobody else is doing, certainly not on this scale in **Britain**. The people who do speak on behalf of artists with disabilities tend to speak locally. It's their strength, they are fighting for the rights of the particular individuals they work with. With this project there is the potential of introducing these artists and this genre into mainstream culture - and if it is successful, mainstream museums may give it wallspace as a result.

AP: Is that what you want?

MoE: I want it to work.

AP: What would it be for it to be successful for you?

MoE: To engage different audiences, from the general public to the more specialist art audience. I want to communicate the complexity and simplicity of the idea and the work.

In many ways, these artists remind me of deep sea creatures that have lived in the ocean since time began. We don't know much about them, we don't really understand them, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. It seems like a good analogy, **The Museum of Everything** as an underwater explorer - but am I purely projecting?

AP: It's unlikely that you are purely projecting, but it is likely that there is a mix of genuine, powerful apprehension and sympathy for these people and their work and that they represent parts of yourself. Those two things may be going on at the same time, which is precisely what animates it. You've been engaged by it because it accords with something in yourself, not that you are one of these artists, but there could be, for example, lots of parts of yourself that are like these underwater creatures.

Earlier you talked about local knowledge. Maybe all real knowledge is local. Those creatures at the bottom of the sea need local knowledge to deal with their local environment, they don't need to deal with a hotel in **South America**! That seems to me to be a good line: not what's wrong with local knowledge, but what's wrong with knowledge that isn't local. Those people convey a vision of an immediate environment, internal and external.

MoE: The role of the museum in whatever form is perhaps to expand that knowledge, to be **Jacques Cousteau**, go under the water and say: *have a look at this, you haven't seen this before.*

AP: The other side of that is that people don't admit that there is an ecosystem. Everything is interdependent. *We* - whoever *we* are - are dependent on these people you found and who found you. Something collaborative is going on even if some people get scared or ignored.

MoE: I have not thought of the interdependence, partially because in my personal life I have few direct connections to disability. Perhaps one could argue that's why I went to find it.

AP: Or accept in a sense that we are all disabled and that it has a metaphorical significance for all of us who can think about it, look at it, feel it.

MoE: My concern with what you've just said, if I understand it correctly, is that we may risk projecting our own perceived vulnerabilities onto someone who clearly has vulnerability in a very real and practical sense. We may be romanticising it.

AP: Of course, that must be right and there is a real distinction. But it seems to me that the distinction exists in some places, not in others. It would seem to me that we are all in different ways disabled in relationships- and what that means is that we are not totally in charge and totally competent in what we are doing. We were all once really disabled, in the sense that we were all babies and that we depended on others in an absolute sense. We depended on those people who looked after us, who made this viable. We don't think a baby is disabled, we think a baby is a baby - and one of the stories that has developed is that we are progressively *independent*. Actually we are progressively *dependent*, we don't get progressively *independent*, we just depend in different ways. I'm not as disabled as the person who can't ride a bike, that's a fact. But there are ways in which the other person's physical impairment is not just a figurative romanticism for me. It's real. I'm moved by it because I presume of course it is a projection, but it doesn't make it less true that something about that disability has an effect on me, who can get on the bike because: a) I may not be able to get on a bike tomorrow; and b) I couldn't always get on a bike.

MoE: When you see a child drawing something, making something, you might think how sweet it is and become envious: *I wish I could do that, that I could be that free*. When you see a 45 year old man in that same state, you don't necessarily think that way.

AP: One of the reasons we don't think it's sweet and fascinating and lovely when a 45 year old man does it, is because we are absolutely taken over by the idea people have to grow up and we have very specific ideas of what that involves. The 45 year old who draws like a child, one way or another, represents somebody with arrested development. The question is why we think like that? What's in the growing-up myth such that when the child does everything it is lovely, when the older person does everything it is *soh dear!*

I'm slightly wary of the criticism of romanticising. I can see the risk of idealising them, of making claims for them that are not in excess of the claims they would make, but may just be excessive. But the value of romanticising them is that it becomes a way of wanting to see value in what they do - and that seems to me to be a good thing to do and a corrective to the way in which they have been undervalued. That matters quite a lot I think. They haven't been romanticised enough.

MoE: Going back to your point of needing to be looked after, about our development, these people are being looked after, they are being protected and supported to make art by virtue of holding somebody's hand. Perhaps what we are saying with **Exhibition #4** is that just because you need to hold somebody's hand to cross the road, it doesn't mean you are not crossing the road.

AP: Absolutely. Or that it's essential in looking after people that you are able to respond to what they make.

MoE: I came to talk about creativity and art, yet you talk about making as the fundamental idea here.

AP: Yes - because for all sorts of reasons one is continually making something from what one is experiencing and feeling. It's the making of it which is a part of one's orientation.

Your project at **Tate Modern - Exhibition #2** - made me think about the effect on somebody when they begin to think of themselves as an artist.

Children don't think of themselves as artists until their parents tell them that's what they are doing. If I make you a cup of tea, you are not going to be thinking: *he's an artist making tea*. Yet for me there is a line from the cup of tea to the painting, these are all on a continuum, even though they are aesthetically different. They are *made* things and they are *made*-for other people.

MoE: So where does the evaluation system come in?

AP: That's the question. To put it crudely: what do you want these people to be if you don't want them to be rich and famous?

MoE: I want these artists to be respected, in terms of people acknowledging them as making astonishing creative work: art.

I realise that I'm also interested in **The Museum of Everything** as a catalyst for a fundamental change in perception. If I originally came to you saying I wanted to change how art was defined, now my goal is wider: I want to change how people perceive the universe!

AP: That's much more interesting to me.

MoE: That's annoying. Yes it is!

AP: Looking through your books, seeing this work, it's as if I'm waiting for some kind of recognition, something which makes me want to go on looking, even if I don't know why.

In that moment something happens between me and the object. **The Museum of Everything** is creating the conditions in which there can be affinities or recognitions - and that's very powerful.

MoE: People have the affinity you describe, yet I am uncertain as to why. Among people who know this work, there is a consensus that each new artist demands a new set of values. You can't look at one in the same way you look at another. Each exists independently.

AP: What comes to my mind is that the word *disabled* is not the right word. I don't think that, straightforwardly, we are having an affinity with being disabled. We are having an affinity with something that is largely unconscious, but that for some reason works on us. These works are idiomatic, which is what makes the exhibition so extraordinary. They show you what we all have: very different languages that overlap.

One of the things I want to think is that other people can make or say something with which I am in accord, even though I don't really understand it. It's partly a communal theory: there is somebody with whom I've got something in common, but I don't know what it is. I look at it and think: *something about that wakes me up in my body.*

MoE: Certainly that's my experience. Looking woke me up - and each individual artist wakes me up all over again.

What you describe is a relationship: with the work and with each artist. As a professional, doing what you do, you need to connect and communicate with people. That same depth, that fundamental connection, is what I believe is possible to achieve here.

How interesting to be able to communicate on an incredibly substantial level in a very commercial and insubstantial space.

AP: Yes, I agree. I think that's amazing!

[END]

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