

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Anne-Francoise Rouche**

Anne-Francoise Rouche

b 1968 (Vielsalm, Belgium)

A fine art graduate of L'Institut des Beaux-Arts Saint-Luc in Liège, Anne-Françoise Rouche is founder and director of CEC La Hesse, Belgium. Artists from the studio have been exhibited worldwide, including Madmusée, Belgium (2011), Le Centre Historique Minier de Lewarde, France (2011) and Gaia Museum, Denmark (2009). Eight artists from CEC La Hesse are presented in Exhibition #4.

[START]

MoE: **Anne-Francoise**, you run one of the most creative workshops in **Europe**. Yet your views on how to run this kind of studio and how best to enable your artists are not typical. How did it all begin?

AFR: I started this project many years ago. Over time I found different ways to work with each artist.

With **Benoit Monjoie**, for example, it's about coaching him all the time. He does the painting and we do not interfere. We become his mentor, asking him about what colours he wants to use and stimulating him where we can. **Benoit** is fundamentally quite an anxious and anguished character and it is important for him to feel secure. Once he does, he makes the painting. **Benoit** reproduces images of models because he likes the beautiful women he sees in magazines. He doesn't paint nudes because his mother won't let him - so we help him find others, images which have a strong composition and interesting colours.

MoE: How do you train the people who run the workshop with you?

AFR: We have six people working in the different studios. Their job is to offer new opportunities to the artists. We don't draw or paint with our artists, we propose ideas which they may not be able to think of themselves due to their handicaps. It's up to them what they want to do, we just offer the opportunities and techniques.

MoE: What's interesting is that it is a collaboration between the workshop and the artist. Both elements are necessary for the realisation of the project.

AFR: This is a really important point. If you left these artists alone in their bedrooms, they would not achieve the same level of excellence. Technically speaking, it's not art brut because the process is conditional on our involvement. The studio, the environment, the mood, the energy, these elements means the work is not the same as it would be if the artists were creating it on their own. We are the coaches, the means of production.

MoE: You mentioned *Art Brut*. I am interested in terminology because I often feel the words create the problem. *Outsider Art* is not a good term because somebody *inside* defines someone *outside*. Even *Art Brut* is an excuse, inclusion by exclusion.

From what I can see, the art being created in your workshop is not something else. It is art. Not therapy, but art.

AFR: That's completely right. It's not therapy and it's really important people understand this. We are not therapists, we are artists. There are no categories. We make art, actual art, just like everybody else. The difference is the disability – but that is only one thing in an artist's life, it is not their whole life.

MoE: Tell me about **Dominique Theate**? What is his story, how did he begin and develop his practice?

AFR: **Dominique** is 42 years old. At 18, he was involved in a motorcycle accident and was in hospital for a long time. He had to re-learn how to speak, how to write and how to draw. Yet when he arrived in the studio I was surprised by how skilled he was. He's a very good draughtsman, a genius. If you left him alone to draw, he would repeat the same image over and over again. So we propose other options and he lets us know what he wants. It's a constant dialogue.

MoE: **Dominique**'s got a very defined aesthetic. How did this evolve? He seems, from what I can see, to have three styles: the cartoon style where he draws wrestlers; a portrait style where he draws himself; and a montage-based layered style.

AFR: **Dominique** has certain themes and personal mythologies. He enters them, like an actor in a scene. He's especially fond of **BMW** cars and loves wrestling because his step-father (who is his hero) has a big moustache like **Hulk Hogan**. The wrestling, the cars, the cartoons and the self-portraits all reflect this personal universe.

Dominique also loves to write. In the early days I gave him a computer he writes his auto-biography on it every evening. He is also working with a comic book artist. It's a graphic novel and he does the narration, a sort of contemporary art comic.

MoE: Another artist you work with is **Jean-Jacques Oost**. What is his background?

AFR: **Jean-Jacques** has been here since we started. He's an old friend and when I started my job in the education department and proposed the first

workshop, he immediately wanted to join. **Jean-Jacques** was in a domestic accident which had left him disabled. He draws naturally, like a child, and his themes are nudes and the sea.

MoE: What is your relationship to the commercialisation of the work?

AFR: We sell works so that we can fund the work we do with our artists. Money is split 50/50 between the artist and the studio. Generally we only sell during exhibitions.

MoE: Do the artists know and understand that you're selling the work?

AFR: Someone like **Eric Derkenne** doesn't know or care. For others, like **Dominique** and **Jean-Jacques**, it's an important form of recognition.

MoE: I'm interested in the cognitive ability of your artists to understand the process of making and communicating. On the one hand it's art, not therapy. Does it also have therapeutic effects?

AFR: We are not therapists, but we know that we have to look after our artists. It's difficult for some of them to go to their own openings. From birth they've been looked at negatively. For once they have skills which other people can appreciate. Their art is described as incredible and beautiful. It is often difficult for these artists to understand and that's why we have to be gentle with them. When we put on an exhibition, for example, we don't choose all our artists, we make a selection. We feel that it is very important for the artists themselves to realise this.

MoE: As with any artist.

AFR: Yes! It's respectful to them to treat them like a normal artist.

MoE: Imagine I have a friend with a disability and my friend is creative. What are the first steps to create a workshop like yours?

AFR: For me, the most important ingredients are the relationships. When we choose our staff and curators, we try them out in the studio for a week. We soon find out if they understand the nature of the exchange. That relationship is essential, because if our artists can't relate to the staff, then it's not going to work creatively.

MoE: What do you advise in terms of materials?

AFR: Pastels, acrylic paints, not gouache - good materials only. You don't need much: some paper, acrylics, pencils, pens, maybe oils (although oil can be difficult because you have to wait so long between each step).

MoE: The other big factor I am aware of is time.

AFR: It's important not to expect fast results. There was a girl who was fond of coming to the studio but who didn't produce anything substantial. She enjoyed coming, so we let her come. After three years, she started creating sculptures using paper, card and photographs. The results were amazing. You need time to get these results.

MoE: Do you hire people with a therapy background?

AFR: No, it's only art people here. For therapists, only the process is important, not the result. For me, the result is important because my job is to help my artists be recognised as artists. If you end up with bad results, that's not possible.

MoE: In some ways you have a dilemma: you don't want to force a result but you do want a result. You have to balance that tension. A therapist won't get that balance right in the same way as an artist will. An artist is equally interested in the process and the result.

AFR: Completely. The artists we work with are influenced and depend on the workshops. The artist is not separate from the studio because ...

MoE: ... the artist is formed by his environment.

AFR: Yes. The studio conditions the artist and the artist conditions the studio. You can't separate the two.

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