

The Museum of **Everything**  
**Exhibition #4**

Conversation with **Chris Dercon**

**Chris Dercon**

b 1958 (Lier, Belgium)

Chris Dercon is director of Tate Modern in London and former director of Haus der Kunst in Munich (2003/10), Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans van Beuningen (1996/2003) and Witte de With(1990/5). Producer of several award-winning films, Dercon has hosted exhibitions for Stiftung Eward and has supported the work of Atelier Herenplaats in Rotterdam, whose artists feature in Exhibition #4.

[START]

JB: Chris, I wanted to discuss with you our next project at **The Museum of Everything** which focuses on work from studios for artists with developmental disabilities.

CD: It is a very interesting topic. Most people don't know about these places or that they have a professional history.

JB: Do you have a direct connection yourself?

CD: One of the earliest examples I encountered when I was living and working in **Belgium**, was **Jan Hoet** - the famous director of the **Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst** in **Ghent** - who did **Chambres d'Amis** in 1986. His father was the director of the **Open Psychiatric Institute**, a radical institute in **Geel, Belgium**.

**Hoet** said that his interest in **Joseph Beuys** and **David Hammons** came directly from his father's work and that his encounters at a young age with patients influenced his exhibition projects and his personal relationship with art and artists. He was certainly one of the first people to break down these barriers.

There was also **Rudy Luijters** - a Dutch-Belgian artist who worked in the same institute and created inventories of flowers with the patients. In fact it was always artists who went to these places first, because these were interesting environments for them.

After, there was my involvement, as director of the **Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen** in **Rotterdam**, with the **Galerie Herenplaats** artists and the juried shows we hosted at the **Haus der Kunst** in **Munich** with **Stiftung Euard** for artists with mental disabilities.

In both cases I had to convince my colleagues and staff about the absolute seriousness and importance of these initiatives and their presence at our own institutions.

Other examples I know of from my own practice were the **Hohenbüchler** sisters who worked with kindergartens and institutions. They came from a Viennese context where these kind of things were considered normal. **Arnulf Rainer** and his collaborations with the **Gugging** artists was another example.

JB: There seems to be very little of this kind of practice at museums in **Britain** - and also few progressive art studios.

CD: I don't think there are many groups like **Herenplaats** in the **UK** - not like in **Austria**, **Germany** and the **Netherlands**. These are incredibly serious workshops and artists are becoming interested.

The artist **Matt Mullican** told me he went to an institution and one of the people there was constantly putting perfume on himself to keep devils away. **Mullican** said he also does this but with strategic intentions. He felt that he could learn from people who do this without intention and that if they work together they can influence each other. The artist **Christoph Schlingensief** also worked regularly with disabled people in film and on stage.

My dream would be to integrate these ideas, to convince the art world and remind them of the examples of **Jan Hoet**, **Arnulf Rainer**, the **Hohenbüchlers**, **Yayoi Kusama**, **Matt Mullican**, **Christoph Schlingensief** - then we can start to move something around!

JB: It's fascinating what **Mullican** says about intention. Can art accept an artist who doesn't form an intention to make art?

CD: That is the absolutely fundamental question. The word *intention* has to be replaced with other words: *endogenous* or *exogenous strategies* or *methodologies*.

JB: Artists who run studios for artists with disabilities often speak of needing to unlock the desire to create; and that once it is unlocked, it flows. How do we contextualise this idea, where there is an intention to create and communicate, but not necessarily an intention to create art as we conceive of it?

CD: You have to approach this from another direction. Is it even correct to say that an artist always has intention to create something? So many artists just say:

*I feel I have to do this, I feel the need to undertake this, I really don't know why I did this!*

Artists like **Matt Mullican** don't use the word *intention*. They are two or three people at the same time, they look at themselves from a distance, in a mirror. It's a classical psycho-analytical effect. So-called *outsider artists* don't look at themselves as a unique double. They don't have that analytical process.

An artist like **Yayoi Kusama** has many mirrors in her work. These endless

reflections are how she perceives herself. That's why you can't say she has the classical intention of an artist and why she is in between these two types of processes. **Matt Mullican** also does this, it's the reason he creates pieces under hypnosis, in order not to distance himself from that other **Matt Mullican**.

JB: If we think of the conscious drive of some of the important creative minds in the latter half of the last century, a lot of work was an attempt to escape self-conscious intention. For example, **Robert Bresson** always used non-actors in his films.

What are your thoughts in relation to this, to the idea of art as a defining word, to the practice of an artist and the relationship to our fundamental expressive and creative urges.

CD: Artists are leaning more towards what they call *performative structures*, both in terms of body language and visual language. The accent is on the word *performativity*, which is different from *performing* or *acting out*.

We are now leaving the era of the artist as god, a genius whom we are to respect and obey, away from characters like **Joseph Beuys** and **Mario Merz**. Artists today are more like sub-gods. Instead of geniality, we have a kind of normality, which implies subnormality and abnormality. Artists like **Arnulf Rainer**, **Marlene Dumas** or **Mike Kelley** are fascinated by these other worlds, in that which is not finished. They are imperfect and lead us to a kind of performing situation.

This is why **The Museum of Everything** is on track; but maybe the word *Everything* isn't right - because you also have to make the case that some of these artists are exceptional and others are not. How are you going to use this criteria?

JB: In any field there are the masters. **Henry Darger** and **Martín Ramírez** are masters because of the work, not because of an ideology. Our role at the museum is to bring those who we believe deserve a wider audience to that audience - and to let them make those decisions.

CD: The tradition of conceptual art can help us here, because both in the official and unofficial world, the people who look at this work talk not about aesthetics, but about strategies. These strategies can be methodologies or processes.

The schizophrenic artist, for example, is using a completely different process to the autistic artist. We are more interested in this work today

because we are more open to other strategies, which are also strategies of performativity; and these so called abnormalities are more accepted in the world of performativity than in the world of aesthetic pleasure.

JB: The word *strategy* is clearly a meaningful alternative to describe these practices, but is it an alternative word to *art*?

CD: We are interested in so-called *abnormalities* because they help us think about our own imperfections and contradictions. The grotesque is just such an abnormality - think of the work and life of Paul Thek or Dieter Roth or some of the sceneries of Jeff Wall. That is why we see so many films with non-professional actors. We are fascinated by and compete with their so-called *imperfections*.

These workshops demand we participate in a much greater way than objects which we shall call *perfect art* by *perfect artists*. We long for performance, we long to participate. The best works of the so-called *outsider artists* demand we participate and that is why we don't mind when they are completely repetitious.

JB: What form does our participation take in that situation?

CD: It can be as simple as asking questions:

- *Could I do this myself?*
- *Is this something I need to understand?*
- *Is there something I could do better or different?*
- *How would I react if I had the drive to do these things?*

This work sparks many questions, which is why artists like Mullican and Schlingensiefel became interested.

JB: You mentioned your connection with Atelier Herenplaats in Rotterdam. Have you curated work from their artists with contemporary or impressionist work? Or only with itself?

CD: When I was director of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, I was interested in the horizontal symmetry of our installations. I curated Herenplaats artists, but not with contemporary artists, just as it would be wrong to put Picasso next to African objects or minimal artists next to Japanese objects.

JB: Is that because it is inevitably comparative?

CD: I don't believe in assimilation. Similarities have to be a

performance, an act of learning, not an act of feeling. When you put things next to each other, it's pure feeling, not thinking.

JB: The first show I was involved with, *Inner Worlds Outside* at the *Whitechapel Gallery* in 2006, curated contemporary and modern artists besides self-taught and outsider artists, as if to say:

*Look how similar this work is, look how connected these objects and these artists are!*

To date, *The Museum of Everything* has only presented this work with itself. Yet it does so to advertise the existence of the work, to encourage it to be curated elsewhere, not comparatively, but within a wider context.

CD: In *New York* in the late 1980s there was a show I loved at the *Dia Art Foundation*. On one floor were the typologies of *Bernd* and *Hilla Becher* and another of *Frrderic Bruly Bouabré*. To show the two together would have ruined it for both; here you had to make a junction in one way or another, both in time and in space.

Suddenly I started to think about the difference between the western and non-western civic bodies. The *Bouabris* are mental landscapes, the *Bechers* are industrial landscapes. That worked very well for me. The exhibition was an absolute masterpiece.

I think what we should start to do in museums is to have collaborations. I don't know what we could come up with for *The Museum of Everything*. Perhaps we could add another title to it: *The Museum of Everything* (where *Everything* is the same).

JB: Thank you *Chris*, *Everything* accepts!

[END]

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