The Museum of Everything
Exhibition #4

Conversation with Colin Rhodes

Colin Rhodes
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Author, educator, curator and artist, Colin Rhodes is Dean and Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Sydney in Australia. Publications include Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives (2000) and Primitivism and Modern Art (1994). Rhodes is President of the European Association of Outsider Art and was a contributing writer for Exhibition #1.

[START]

MoE: Colin, can you tell me a little about your experience with progressive workshops and how you came to know about them.

CR: Two years ago in Melbourne I did a show called *Revealing the Human*. It was a mixture of work from 11 workshops around the world. The primary input was Arts Project Australia.

What occurred to me was that this studio had always felt they were alone; and yet there were others just like them. Same audience, same shows, same artists, all around the world.

MoE: Where did you look?

CR: KCAT in Kilkenny Ireland; Créahm, Belgium; Herenplaats, The Netherlands; Inuti, Sweden; Bifrost, Denmark; Kettuki and Turku in Finland and Creative Growth and Creativity Explored in the United States. The curatorial concept was the human figure and human relationships.

When the work came in, there was a real sense of national and cultural particularity. There's a myth that studios produce the same thing wherever they are. This isn't the case: it is a direct communication of identity, feeling and emotion in pictorial form.

Back when I wrote my book, nearly all the art from workshops was *workshoppy* i.e. just the other side of basket-weaving and envelope stuffing. Since then, more and more artists have worked in a facilitation role within the studios. Without actually forcing the way artists are making work, there has been a flowering of fantastic art.

MoE: What made you look at those workshops? Was it because of Arts Project Australia?

CR: I was stumbling upon these places and realised they were goldmines. I approach things in an open way. When I encountered Atelier Herenplaats it was simply because I was in Rotterdam.

The first thing I saw was the art in the racks. I talked to the director, Frits Gronert, and that's when I recognised that these studios existed around the world. Their raison d'être is enabling artists, as opposed to forcing them to do things or having set regimes of what they want them to do.

MoE: What do you think of the process of the studios versus the output of the studios?

CR: The whole nexus of the studios is at different levels of evolution, whether they're connected to a network or not.

Herenplaats are interested in having artists, not just people placed there. You have to demonstrate within the first 3 or 4 months that art is a vocation that you're committed to. There's a period of art training, but not art schooling. It is a period of facilitated self-discovery, a provision of possibilities so you can decide more knowingly what you want to do. Then you become a Herenplaats artist.

The whole thing is based around the idea that for anybody to blossom in terms of a practice, there have to be physical and conceptual tools in place. Nothing comes out of thin air. It's a process of self-learning.

MoE: What do you think about enablement? You're describing a studio run by artists for artists, versus somewhere that's a therapeutic artistic environment. Do you see any difference in work coming out of an art-focused environment versus a therapeutic environment?

CR: For sure. In an art-focused environment, the work produced is always better. In the therapy-focused environment, there's guidance which is about therapy. Whether this is within an intellectually disabled environment or mental health environment, the results are the same. The impulse to picture or object making is therapeutic - and in work where that is the impulse, they're of a lesser quality.

MoE: I've seen a lot of therapy paintings. They can be very literal. Where it's psychologically led, the language of therapy dominates.

CR: Where it works best is when you have artists working in the studios with arts workers - artists in their own right. However successful or unsuccessful, they are committed to facilitating artistic practice. That way you don't get people living their art vicariously through someone else's art. That is always the danger.

One of the reasons why Herenplaats is successful is that the director is a practising artist. He is not living vicariously through his artists.

MoE: There are many stories about artists discovering self-taught artists. In England there's Ben Nicholson and Alfred Wallis. In Chicago there's Nathan Lerner and Henry Darger. Go to Gugging and Johann Feilacher is an artist as well as a doctor - and he was involved in that original decision to get the work into the art world.

The curator Daniel Baumann describes these studios as more akin to the progressive art academies of the 1970s.

CR: I published an essay 3 years ago that talked about these studios as in many ways more like the 19th Century academy model, rather than the 20th Century art school model. The academy was a place where you could be a student forever. Even in the 20th Century, Matisse was regularly going to classes at the Academie Julian.

The studios are like that. You're not a student like art students are: you become a fixture in the academy, if you're lucky you can be there for life.

MoE: Learning by doing.

CR: That's right; and being with others.

MoE: So it's about creativity.

CR: Yes, whereas the 20th Century model of the art school is a training ground, where you get a qualification and … pow, you're out and part of the art world!

MoE: It seems to me that art school is geared towards a career and a practice, rather than letting it develop.

CR: In art schools today, we're producing people with expectations of a capitalist encapsulated career. It's a career, like being a lawyer or a doctor. It's not an academy experience.

MoE: That goes to back language in my view. Everyone is obsessed with what an *outsider* is. But these artists are non-verbal. Language is not available to them. What's coming out is visual language, a delicate thing. If you're with someone who's developmentally disabled and you show them how to do something, they might copy it. If this is the process, you're keeping them busy without engaging their imagination.

CR: The spread of intellectual capability is very wide. There seem to be kinds of practices which are recognisable in certain conditions.

It is usually easy to tell if an artist has Down Syndrome for example. There is a tendency to engage on outline, even when the work is almost abstract, to engage with contour in a way that disrupts what you would recognise as mimetic. Colours can be bright, almost trippy. There's also an impulse towards representation, even when it's abstract, an approach which is about physiology or place.

MoE: How do you engage with appreciation if something is quite abstract?

CR: It really is difficult when you encounter things that appear as just scribbles, because what equipment do we have to interrogate and deal with that? Things that are within the borders of representation we recognise. You may have all these other differences, but at the end of the day, it is the human agent that is the artist and the human agent that is the audience, encountering each other around the work.

MoE: How do you engage in aesthetic selection? Do you choose out of empathy, sympathy or aesthetics?

CR: I'm a bit Clement Greenberg when it comes to this stuff! I think if you've got a good eye, you can tell when something works or not.

MoE: That's my feeling, but troubling factors come into it. If you contemplate something, you find different ways of appreciating it. We see a lot of scribbles, going back to your analogy, and there's only a few that are worth looking at closely. I usually find myself leaning more towards figurative works, landscapes, stuff with representative qualities. I think it's difficult in terms of how we look at it, because I don't always know if it is us or them. It can't just be about formalist qualities. That's one of my dilemmas with an artist like Dan Miller at Creative Growth. The work astonishes me, but maybe that's just about me. How does one deal with that philosophical fact?

CR: I have a level of separation. As an art historian, I can engage with work that I don't care for in the context of writing a narrative. I try to understand what has been going on and its place in the world.

When it comes to me as an artist, experiencing and enjoying other art, then there is work I really like and that's all I'm interested in.

MoE: You've got a curatorial hat, an art historian hat, an authority outsider person hat. Which one takes you into this work?

CR: The artist hat, the one you didn't mention! My interest comes directly via an art school practice that was engaging with expressionist-type activity. I was interested in issues about empathy, spontaneity, authenticity and practices which were more visceral and less about intellectualising. That's where I was as an art student in London and why I ended being an art historical professional - and I didn't feel I was in an artistic culture that was into that stuff.

MoE: Would you say it's the creativity that led you in?

CR: Yes, absolutely.

MoE: Why do you think so many traditional historic art brut/outsider out critics and collectors do not appreciate this contemporary genre?

CR: If a person becomes psychologically ill, there's a conceptual idea that this person was once not ill. It is a reflective journey that can be verbalised. If a person has an epiphany and becomes a pastor, telling the world about the great revelations of Saint John in pictures, there's a narrative which he is able to verbalise. But you take an artist like Hans Hartman from Herenplaats, he'll talk to you about Rembrandt, then Jesus, then dying, all kinds of stuff, but it's an intrinsic narrative. There is no Hans Hartman pre Down Syndrome, there is no Hans Hartman that is a result of the onset of illness. Hans is Hans.

MoE: There's no epiphany, there's no decline.

CR: Exactly. It's not something I've really thought of or talked about, but in all the other areas, there is another narrative going on, coming from something and going somewhere, whether it's spiritualism, religion or illness. In these studios, the moment of revelation is already there, it's embodied completely in the person.

The discovery that you are an artist does not require an existential step. For people with intellectual disabilities, it's almost impossible to engage in a conceptualised relationship of the subject-object-audience dynamic.

They are completely independent. There will also be a need for the person to be protected and enabled in practical ways, so there isn't that core independence, nor an ability to engage in a relationship with the world in the way that you and I would.

Part of this is also about people's own unconscious recognition of prejudice. While it's nice to think that people with intellectual disabilities might be artists, it's also important to remember that they can be part of the workforce more generally: useful, fulfilled, visible, respected. Rebecca Hoffberger at the American Visionary Art Museum has always employed people with Down Syndrome in proper jobs. The fact that all these people are engaged in activities which are fulfilling to them and are often joyous is a good thing.

MoE: So how do we philosophically transition from the intention to create to the intention to create art?

CR: It's partly about how elastic definitions of artists and art can be within any particular context.

If you go to the National Gallery, there's work from the Duecento to the late 19th Century. The Duecento artist doesn't think of himself as an artist. He's making work as a job for a particular kind of client, who is almost definitely going to be the Catholic Church. It's about producing a highly intentional set of images with the purpose of teaching the masses who can't read.

The late 19th Century British artist is invariably engaging in a middle class pursuit with some kind of story or relationship to place and landscape, to be hung in a domestic setting for a private client.

The question is: how far can definitions of art be stretched in order to accommodate what we are looking at now.

MoE: I want to find the connective tissue. The inelasticity of the definition of art is connected to its desire to control what is called art. The artists we're talking about have never been accepted into the main linguistic and political frameworks. Although art got expanded by Duchamp, by abstraction, by conceptualism, we still cannot go back to the core creative gesture, to the cave painting, and call it art.

CR: One of the journeys in the second half of 20th Century fine art has been away from the visual and into language.

Designers and illustrators talk about the context of their profession through what they refer to as *visual language*. People within the fine art world talk about language, context, what things mean, but they hardly ever talk about *visual language*. If we go back to the Duecento, to the cave painting, it's about a visual language and communication - communication through the visual.

You can see it from a historian's point of view or as a problem about excavating intention. You can see it in the way that a poet sees it, which is not about getting to some sort of essence of intentionality, but how you drift from the poetics of the thing that you're doing.

Any kind of practice that goes on these days is looking at art as visual poetics, thinking not only about how a thing might have a core embodied existence, as a piece of artistic intentionality - and what the specifics of that intentionality are - but also about how the object lives in the world through its interaction with audiences and gains meaning through that interaction.

MoE: That interaction is vital, yet my concern is that it potentially falls into appreciation, taste and subjective assessment. These artists don't have that language. These artworks are their words, sentences, paragraphs. It doesn't matter what form they take.

The curator Paolo Colombo who worked with us on the first exhibition says that you don't really look at these works, you listen to them.

But if intentionality is at the root of the definition of art, then this work must be the missing link. It allows art to return to creative instinct:

> *we were created, we must create.*

CR: The big difficulty is the necessity for an artist to have a practice as well as making art. That practice is all about engaging in utterances about art-making in a discursive way with all the apparatus that goes with the making of an artwork. Jackson Pollock was as likely to go to Peggy Guggenheim's house and piss in a plant pot as he was to engage in discourse around art. The stories of his lack of ability to connect are the

great stories, but they are not what vouch for him as an artist. Until such time where we allow the elasticity to a point where the artist does not have to be engaged at that level of discursive immersion in the art world, it will never happen.

MoE: Surely the best way is to create a definitive proof that this is art, to get the works on the walls?

CR: An important part of it is evidence of a practice. One of the overwhelming pieces of evidence that Judith Scott is an artist, over and above all those issues about intentionality, is the fact that there's a practice. There aren't two Judith Scott pieces in the world, there aren't a dozen that she made over 6 months and never made again. When she started, off she went and the practice developed until the day she died. Hans Hartman has a practice, Anny Servais had a practice. Recognising a practice is an essential element.

MoE: What about work where it's almost automotive?

CR: When you have an artist working like that my impulse is to treat the work as a series, rather than as discrete individual pieces.

MoE: So there's a practice. Is it important that it's not a lead practice and that it's enabled with materials?

CR: It's really important that it's not a lead practice. That applies to almost anybody, wherever they come from, whatever they do. Facilitation is about enabling, so that someone can do the thing they want to do, however much difficulty they might have consciously describing what this thing is.

MoE: So it's practice, it's unforced. Instinctive maybe?

CR: Such that the identity of the individual practitioner is manifest.

MoE: It's more than a style, although that clearly includes a style.

CR: It's about personality, who you are, it's about your individualism coming through.

MoE: But I'm worried that individual vision is our subjective choice of what's good and what's not.

CR: In that sense it's the same as with any artist in terms of their training. Most people who went to art school will attempt to claim that they're self-taught; but it's a useful myth sometimes. You have that sense that you can put the tools in front of someone, whoever they are as an artist, you can provide possible pathways, you can provide exemplars of what might or might not be, but at the end of the day, the really good artist is someone who actually finds a way of negotiating their way through that path in a way that is all about their own creativity.

MoE: I agree with you but good and bad are different discussions. There's the really boring Sunday painter, there's Rembrandt and there's everything in-between. If we're talking about what art is, there's even an argument that says you could have one great piece and that doesn't discount it just because someone doesn't have a practice. If you're defining who an artist is, which I think is what you're getting at, an artist who generally has a practice, generally has an individuation. But uniqueness is subjective. The 20 or so Down Syndrome artists who are very similar are still artists. I don't want to de-access them from my definition, even if they might not be my favourites. If you look at art, art doesn't discount that; it just says that it's not very good. Maybe we should say this, with an artist there is a practice and it's an individual practice. Should we talk about imagination?

CR: One of the things about art-making is a dynamic relationship with the world. That might be constructed in all manner of ways, but it is an engagement. That flies in the face of the notion of the outsider artist and how everything comes from the depths, having nothing to do with life and the universe, other than this amazing inner welling. In the purest sense that is a romantic theory. I think all artwork is engaging with the world. The way you engage with the world and how interiorised that might be, different to other people's engagement, is much less important than the fact that you're engaging. So you have that sense of intentionality, that sense of a practice, you have that sense of visuality, for want of a better word, you have that sense of engagement. As the practitioner, as the artist, if you're not engaging in a very real or connected way with the world of lived experience how is an audience going to engage with that thing you're producing? Because that's all we've got to bring to this. Our experiences might be different but we're engaging at that level in some way.

MoE: So if you've got an engaged practice of creation, that's unguided and intended by the fact it's created, how do we exclude gardening?

CR: The impulses we are dealing with are not impulses to gardening; they're impulses to certain kinds of visual object-making, whether it's about two-dimensional marks on a paper or three-dimensional construction. It's interesting that in a way the whole fine art idea has become confused in terms of the relationship to the object over the last fifty years or so. Art has become more verbal. The impulse that you still have in the work that we're talking about is an impulse into making a visual statement: a two- or three-dimensional object that is not about gardening or any of those other things. It's about non-utilitarian representation.

MoE: So art is the manifestation of intentional creative expression, possibly and usually part of a practice with no goal, except for expression.

CR: Sometimes we don't have the practice, or we don't have access to the practice. But I don't think there's ever really art worth its salt that hasn't been constructed in the context of a practice. We might only have one piece, but I don't think it's a case that only one has ever been made.

MoE: I'm thinking of my experience and I almost never come across a single piece which is that thing, unless it's just one naïve painting that you find at an auction.

CR: But that's about what's survived.

MoE: It's likely that's what has survived, yes. Let's look at a definition:

> *Art is the product or process of deliberately arranging items often with symbolic significance in a way which influences and affects one or more of the senses, emotions or intellect. It encompasses a diverse range of human activities, creations and modes of expressions including music, literature, film, photography, sculpture and painting. The meaning of art is explored in a branch of philosophy known as aesthetics and even disciplines such as history and psychology analyse its relationships with human and generations.*

Traditionally, the term *art* was used to refer to any skill or mastery. This conception changed during the Romantic period, when art came to be seen as *a special faculty of the human mind to be classified with religion and science*. Generally, art is made with the intention of stimulating thoughts and emotions. Does that exclude our lot? I feel it probably does. I mean, *made with the intention of stimulating thoughts and emotions.* I don't think that's correct with any of these guys.

CR: I guess it's how you define that stimulating thoughts and emotions. If we come back to that notion that it's about making sense of the world and communicating something of that interaction with the world, that's another way of saying it's about stimulating thoughts and emotions. That definition is far too much about what the artist is trying to impinge on the viewer and not very much at all about how the world comes into the artist in order for the artist to make work.

MoE: It demands an intention to be appreciated which is clearly not there. There's another one here:

> *Art is the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments and experiences that can be shared with others.*

Imagination, that's a really complicated one. So much of this work is about personal history, not imagination.

CR: Imagination is a particular kind of function. I just prefer the issues about experience and that dynamic of interior and exterior, the attempt to comprehend the world which is then translated into an attempt to communicate something of what it is to exist in the world.

MoE: It is a wider definition, but still one which is exclusionary because it demands an audience. While I think these works we are dealing with are effectively words and language, I don't think necessarily they're to anyone. They're often self-contained and somebody else looking at them is an unintended consequence. To be honest, that applies to intentional, fully functioning artists too. Half of them don't want to show anything to anyone anyway.

Did we get anywhere?

CR: Not sure.

[END]

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