

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Matthew Higgs**

Matthew Higgs

b 1964 (Wakefield, England)

Matthew Higgs is an artist, curator, writer and director of White Columns Gallery, New York. Former director of exhibitions at the ICA in London (1996/9) and a former curator at the Wattis Institute in San Francisco (2001/4), Higgs was a contributor and speaker at Exhibition #1 and has exhibited the work of Creative Growth artists Dan Miller (2011) and William Scott (2009), both featured in Exhibition #4.

[START]

MoE: **Matthew**, I wondered if we could talk a little about your involvement with self-taught art and in particular with the artists at **Creative Growth**. You have curated the work of **Judith Scott, Dan Miller, William Scott** and **Aurie Ramirez**, I wondered if you could articulate what it is you feel is important about these artists and what they mean in terms of our understanding of art?

MH: When I first came across **Creative Growth** ten years ago, my limited understanding of self-taught, outsider artists and creativity in relation to disabilities, was naïve at best. Encountering an organisation like **Creative Growth** forced me to think about my own relationship with this work and with art in general.

I had spent most of the 1990s teaching undergraduate and graduate level in art schools. What was interesting was just how different the atmosphere was at **Creative Growth**. Art was being made for reasons that remained out of reach. The emphasis in conventional art schools is a pressure to explain, to defend one's intellectual and aesthetic territories. In an open studio structure like **Creative Growth**, artists have a very different relationship with the making of work. There's a space between the viewer, the work and the context in which the work is produced which remains unresolvable. It prevents you using your usual tools or prejudices. You have to approach the work from a completely different angle.

Ten years later, I still haven't fully come to terms with this work. We don't have access to the central part: why the work is being made. For me that was the big eye-opener. There is a different rationale for the making of these things, a completely different way of thinking about the potential of the creative act and art in general. It's not bound by a prescriptive or conventional art school approach, where young people go in trying to express themselves and their ideas and are forced to articulate, explain and defend their territory. The absence of that in the work produced by developmentally and other disabled artists gives it a different kind of existence. It is more enigmatic, which to some degree gets fetishised and brings its own problems, and at the same time isn't bound by the conventional structures that we apply to art. This not only liberates the object, but our relationship with it, because some things must remain unknowable.

MoE: The difficulty for the mainstream curator or critic seems to be about differentiating between art as a considered intellectual activity and art as creativity per se. This work seems to encapsulate an intention to create, but rarely an intention to create art. Yet it ticks all the boxes of what art is.

MH: The couple that started **Creative Growth, Creativity Explored** and **NIAD** were the **Katzes**. They thought through the relationship between artists with disabilities and the professional art community. From the beginning they wanted professional artists to work in the studios as a support team, with a professional curator as a go-between for the studio and the larger world. They were already thinking about the membranes between these two ideas, because the classic myth of the isolated outsider artist doesn't really apply when you think about the workshop environment. What is being created is a community; and in some cases the artists work in these communities for 25 years.

There is also a kind of *here* narrative, a conversation amongst artists of very different abilities and disabilities, where things can occur and unfold collectively. In the conventional art world, it's usually during college that young artists work collaboratively. What's interesting about **Creative Growth** and other organisations like it, is the emphasis on collaboration, community and collectivity. It changes the individual objects because they haven't been produced in isolation or behind any kind of walls, societal or otherwise. They've been produced in public. That's one of the most thrilling things about going to these places: art is being made and creativity is unfolding in the public domain. It's quite different to our conventional relationship with art and artists, because it folds back into the most fundamental ideas about art that precede any attempt self-consciously to make work that is considered art. We'll never fully understand why they're being made, whereas with a more conventional trained artist we're usually in full awareness of why the work exists.

MoE: You've raised a few key points. The autistic, non-verbal artist **Harald Stoffers** writes letters explaining what he did yesterday and what he's going to do tomorrow. How do we know he intends more than a letter? How do we know he's not designing it? Our inability to answer these questions creates an enigma. It is a very different thing to the situation

where you walk into a gallery and the assistant tells you what the artist formally intends.

That enigma is important and inevitable. You look at the ancient paintings on the wall of a cave and there's no question they tick many of the boxes of what we call art; but at the same time, they do not fit into what we understand as contemporary art. Is there a danger in presenting this work alongside contemporary art too?

MH: My feeling is that there is not. The **Katzes** who founded **Creative Growth** had already envisaged a public dimension to this activity. They weren't interested in the idea of creating a privileged or private support structure for these artists, they were keen for this thing to unfold in the public domain. That's why each organisation has a gallery, so the artists who work there, even if they aren't aware of the existence of **Jay Jopling** or **Tracey Emin**, are aware of the fact that the things they make in the studio make a short journey to a different kind of space, where they're displayed and seen. The same structures we use in the art world, the private view, the exhibition, the gallery invitation, are mirrored identically within these organisations. The artists are often aware that their creativity has a subsequent life in the public domain, because they literally see it. Yet around each of these steps there remains an unknown or unquantifiable aspect which can't be articulated; and in some respects, that's very refreshing.

You don't want an art dealer telling you what you're supposed to be thinking. At the same time, we're not primitivists, we don't expect a pure experience every time we encounter art. The work that comes out of the workshops is a hybrid; it's neither one, nor the other, not the clichéd *wild man* working in the woods with no external influences, nor the savvy MFA student reading **ArtForum** magazine. It's something else and it's that *something else-ness* that interested the **Katzes** in the first place. They certainly weren't interested in creating an outsider art factory.

The fact that the work is so extraordinary from these places is testament to their foresight: they saw it was there, even before they had any real evidence. These organisations are now approaching 40 years old, they've proved it. It's everyone else's job to catch up and create contexts like it for all the other artists in the world with mental and developmental disabilities.

MoE: The gallery itself is hugely important because so much of art doesn't exist unless it is seen and sold.

MH: The **Katzes** were interested in the idea of creating economies for people with disabilities. Instead of being solely reliant on benefits and social services, they wanted artists to benefit from their labours. What they did was take control of that process, rather than allowing the art dealer to step in and *exploit* the artists. They created a structure that allowed the work to be shown and sold, so that the artist themselves would benefit as well as the workshop. This was very advanced thinking, how individuals excluded from other opportunities can create opportunities for themselves. They also located the galleries into the **Bay Area** artistic community, right where artists and small galleries have always been. That was a real masterstroke and it is why these places have remained so vital. They haven't been grafted into the community, rather they are central to the community.

MoE: It occurs to me that no matter what the nature of an individual's disability, artists working within these organisations feel success. There's not only the *success* of making, but also the *success* of experiencing people appreciating the work. Much of the best art, from my experience, tends to come out of the best art workshops. It suggests that these extraordinary relationships are a form of collaboration between that artist and the workshop.

MH: The point you make is the same as with the best MFA programmes. Strong MFA programmes with a great faculty attract ambitious students and during the time spent there, their work gets better. I think it's true that if you were a young artist with disabilities in 3 or 4 years at **Creative Growth** your work would accelerate, because the circumstances to allow that to happen have been created.

MoE: Whenever I make a grand statement about an artist with a disability, I realise I could make the very same statement about an artist in the mainstream art world and it would be equally correct - even the idea of the collaboration, such as a gallerist working with the artist to achieve maximum potential or reach. The difference is that here the goals are not primarily commercial. They are more often than not, creative. This gives a purity to the whole thing.

MH: What's even more remarkable about these workshops is that all the artists come from the locality. What they're doing is providing a context for individuals who would otherwise have no platform. That's extraordinary and frightening. It means that in every great city and town in the world, there's an equal number of talented people with disabilities, but they just don't have access to a programme to allow them to become visible. It can't be a coincidence that so many amazing artists just happen to live in the **Bay Area**. They're everywhere and we're just unaware of them.

MoE: When we were researching this exhibition, we found a lot of strong studios in **Germany, Italy, Japan** and **America**. Yet one of the places with very few was **Britain**. We can't find a **Dan Miller** or a **William Scott**. They're clearly here, they just aren't in an environment encouraging them to create. I wonder whether you had an opinion on why that is?

MH: When I came across these places ten years ago, I was in my mid-30s. It was such a visceral shock to me, because I'd never even heard of organisations like these. They largely didn't exist in my experience in the **UK**, because whatever combination of radical, progressive thinking occurred in the **Bay Area** in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it allowed something to happen of which there's no equivalent in the **UK**. I don't know whether it's to do with the social, political and economic situation or the kind of prescriptive way the **National Health Service** works. There just wasn't space within that to create a radical community - **RD Laing** was probably the closest in terms of a radical idea, but the end wasn't to produce an art workshop. It was a different kind of experiment.

The **Bay Area** always had great social services. This makes it unusual in the **United States**, because those services don't exist to the same extent in, say, **Detroit** or **New Orleans**, places where you can only begin to imagine what kind of artists might be working there. It was an anomaly.

I was in **Berkeley** for the opening of **Create** at the **Berkeley Art Museum**, which I curated with **Lawrence Rinder**. It features 20 artists from **Creative Growth, Creativity Explored** and **NIAD**. One of the things we came upon was the long-term investment and commitment of these organisations. An artist is there for life if it makes sense and if they choose to be. So you can enter into a programme aged 22 and realistically spend the next 50 years of your life engaged, involved and implicated within the organisation's his-

tory. That's a unique idea, that a support structure is available to someone for their entire life. The only thing I can think of that's like it, is prison!

This approach allows the artist's work to evolve organically, to grow in a condition based on the circumstances in which it finds itself. It's radical and remarkable that these organisations, if they keep their funding, will support their artists indefinitely. It's a very un-British idea.

MoE:

MoE: In **England** there's a lot of art therapy, but it's therapy - and the result of a therapeutic endeavour is not seen as art.

That's frustrating, because this work seems more accurately to mirror human creativity than art in its more restrictive, intentional description. What these disabled artists show us is that the human brain is elastic. No matter what stage of development, the creative spirit forces its way out. Sometimes it simply needs encouragement, which is what the workshops are doing in order to find form. Once it finds form, there it is. There's a style just like with any mainstream artist. There's a focus, just like any mainstream artist. There's all sorts of things being said, even if they're not said in a way that we might understand them, but this is their language and our inability to understand should not prejudice our respect for it.

MH: It seems to me that art schools exist to create a kind of consensus. They don't exist to create or encourage difference. Consequently the art that comes out is possessed by consistent mannerisms, tropes, processes and structures. Organisations like **Creative Growth** approach each artist as a completely independent case. The nature and circumstances of the disability vary. As you said, whatever's there is so idiosyncratic that you can't generalise.

That's one of the great things about trying to identify what this stuff should be called. We can call it art or something like art, but even that's inadequate because each artist is an entirely separate entity. A graduating class coming out of a BFA programme tend to behave consistently. This is often the disappointing thing about so much contemporary art, it's so mannered, you often recognise the mannerisms before you recognise any-

thing interesting about the person who might have made it. It's the exact opposite with this kind of work. Its idiosyncratic nature is the first thing one is forced to deal with. Then we might try and make an aesthetic reference to something we're familiar with, but that's both the easiest and possibly the worst trap to fall into. Attempting to bring it back into our experience of art and art history doesn't ultimately help us approach understanding how and why this thing exists and what it might mean. You have to recalibrate every time you encounter another artist's work at an organisation like **Creative Growth** - and that's not what you do when you walk around the galleries in **Chelsea** or the **East End of London**. What you end up doing there is building up a set of references and relationships based on your previous experience; yet every time you encounter the work produced in these workshops and studios, it just throws that completely.

It's a fundamental challenge not necessarily to *unlearn*, but perhaps to think harder. As someone who's seen too much art, enough for ten lifetimes, it's a formal challenge to all of my prejudices; and it's very refreshing.

MoE: Putting together work from artists all over the world who have no relationship to each other, except that they've been allowed that creative privacy and expression, feels like an important journey. It feels like a **Duchamp** moment.

MH: It's still early days. It was not that long ago that there was a fairly unsophisticated public dimension to the presentation of this work. People have been interested for most of the 20th Century, but it's not until recently that a more ambitious set of curatorial approaches has started. Initiatives like yours and those we have initiated at **White Columns** in **New York** are trying to establish ways intelligently to create new platforms for this work, which in turn creates new thinking in relation to this work. **Massimiliano Gioni** who works at the **New Museum** and with **Maurizio Cattelan** has always been very interested in this kind of art production. **Jeremy Deller** and **Alan Kane's Folk Archive** was also an interesting approach to a similar set of issues. Something significant also happened in the past 20 years, because the field moved from an historical idea of outsider and self-taught art into a contemporary present tense idea. The approach represented by say, the **Prinzhorn Collection**, is literally historical. What seems to be most interesting in the work of these artists is its present tense-ness, its contemporariness. That's also where it presents

problems, because most people are often resistant to the new. They ultimately prefer things to be validated, vindicated or consolidated – which is a condition of the process of something becoming historical. However, its currency from its currentness is one of the things that's most compelling about the work being produced today. The field is growing, the interest is growing. That is evidenced by the response to your shows and as it moves into a much broader understanding.

MoE: It's also fascinating to see this work turning up in mainstream galleries.

MH: Art, in the most conventional sense, is a language that needs to be taught and learnt, both in terms of making it and also in terms of viewing or understanding it. The interesting thing about all kinds of *outsider* and other forms of self-taught art is it presents a challenge to these notions, where conventional logic no longer prevails. In each case it seems as if the work produced in these workshops is *speaking* with a completely idiosyncratic dialect or accent, consequently its subtlety and nuance is specific. It's not about the literal manifestations of words or language, rather it's the idea that these objects or artworks are very heavily inflected, very specific and as such profoundly subjective gestures. It makes everything much more complicated, which is perhaps why this work is so profoundly engaging.

[END]

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