

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

Conversation with **Paolo Colombo**

**Paolo Colombo**

b 1978 (Italy)

Art advisor for the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art and curator of the Thessaloniki Biennale (2011), Paolo Colombo an award-winning film producer and the former curator of Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo in Rome, the Istanbul Biennale (1999) and former director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva (1989/2000). Colombo co-curated Exhibition #1 at the Pinacoteca Agnelli in Italy.

[START]

MoE: We worked together on **Exhibition #1** in **Italy** and included a number of artists with disabilities from progressive art studios. For **Exhibition #4** we are focusing exclusively on these artists, yet most art museums do not consider what they do to be *art*.

PC: We have to understand what the term *art* means today. It is work, a career, it is the academies which enable that career.

MoE: So the art world is structured more about career than creativity?

PC: Exactly. The issue of creativity is not as true for somebody in the art world today as it was 50 years ago. People are doing different things that they call *art*, but which may not be art; others are doing things that they don't call *art*, because they want to separate it from art world structures. It's different from an individual assessment of a reality and the urgency to give it a shape and form.

MoE: The works in our show are creative gestures. Yet many of the artists are without language. Even if they are verbal, it's often without the language of daily behaviour. Their work emerges in a different form from the language of mainstream art.

PC: It is important to remember that there are two forms: one is work upon commission, whether or not you know the person who has commissioned the work or not; the other does not work on commission.

The art world today, whether an artist wants it or not, works on commission. There is already a destination in mind. It's a Marxist relationship between art, its producer and the consumer – *what, how* and *for whom*? The questions are:

- *what sort of object or activity is this?*
- *how does it fit into the world of art?*
- *for whom is it produced?*

I don't think the work done in these workshops is relevant to these three questions. It's relevant to the *what* and the *how* questions, but *for whom* is lacking. That's what makes it so engaging. Certainly there's an indirectness which is crucial to the way it is produced.

MoE: That's all true. Yet it's also true for many of the outsider/ art brut artists. Part of their appeal is that work is not made with the view of a market or a career or, as you said, a destination.

PC: There's also no sense of the cost of the transaction. The cost of making a work, whether it be a psychological, time or economic cost, is not considered at any level.

MoE: I can see a crossover there with some of the more obsessive artists of mainstream art, the ones who pursue it because they have to. Yet what separates the artists in this show is the relationship between the workshop as enabler and the artist as enabled.

If we look at an artist like **Henry Darger**, he was intending to make something, even if he was only doing it for himself. There was a perception of art and himself as an art-maker.

With these artists, there is a very different perception. In some of the most progressive workshops there may be a gallery, so that participants understand the idea of exhibiting and even selling work. In sophisticated studios, like **Gugging** in **Austria**, the artists will describe themselves as artists making art. But that's the result of forty years of development of that particular institution.

PC: It probably means something completely different to them than to a graduate of **Goldsmiths College**. There isn't a unique understanding of art. I shall quote you something by **Joseph Brodsky**:

*An awareness of time is a profoundly individual experience. That in the course of this life every person sooner or later finds himself in the position of **Robinson Crusoe**, carving notches and having found, say seven or ten of them, crossing them out. To the origin of ornament, regardless of the preceding civilisation or of that to which this person belongs, these notches are a profoundly solitary activity, isolating the individual and forcing him toward an understanding, if not of uniqueness, then at least of the autonomy of his existence in the world.*

When you dig deep down, to **Robinson Crusoe** carving a notch, indicating each day that's passed, you are doing an activity which is completely solitary and autonomous. It's the antithesis of the Marxist approach,

which states that the activity is connected to the social relationship. All activities are complex - but to which part do you give the most importance? Is it the carving of the notches or the critical appraisal of the notches? If you look to the response, then the marking becomes something else.

MoE: There certainly seems to be very little appraisal of time for many for these artists, because the notion of time is ...

PC: ... completely individual.

MoE: So let's bring this towards the notional non-artist, the one who's creating for themselves without a sense of time. They're making, it's their own perception as to why, yet the instinct to do it and thereby communicate the success of doing it is there.

If we put ourselves in the context of an art museum with a curator, such as yourself, there's an immediate set of problems. How do you hang this? Do you historicise or segregate? Or do you go for the aesthetic or the emotion? The problem that comes up repeatedly is that major museums do not and will not present this work within the context of other work and will not do so for a number of reasons.

PC: The artists of these workshops have an absolute place everywhere. It is a question of perception that makes it harder for big institutions to open up their doors. It's called gate-keeping, but it's also called recognising who pays the bills and the expectation of those people who pay the bills. The work of the curator is not different to the artist, in the sense of the *what, how* and *for whom*.

MoE: This echoes what I believe to be the case: that the market determines whether an artist has been accepted into the mainstream definition of art. An important art museum might take a gamble on a young artist, but until that artwork is outputted in some form it makes it impossible, because of the relationship of collectors to the museums and the curators. Until it is sold, today it has no existence; and that is why progressive workshops sell their work - they know that their artists won't be privileged and respected as artists until their work is in a contemporary market situation.

The flip of this is that many of the people working with or connected to artists with disabilities are sensitive – and rightly so – to their manipulation and exploitation. For these reasons they may not allow the work to enter the marketplace. The result of this is that it prevents the work from having a normal art trajectory.

PC: It's not necessarily just an issue of the market. Other forms are marketed and that affects the way these works are viewed.

The mainstream fundamentally answers these questions: *what, how* and *for whom*. The moment they stop asking *for whom* there will be bigger freedom – freedom these artists already have.

Let's presume these artists do not have a *for whom*. They think of what to produce and how to produce it. The workshops answer the *how* because they facilitate. They make it possible for people who have difficulty organising themselves to do what they want to do.

These workshops understand the artistic value of these pieces. They may have galleries, they may organise shows, they may even sell the work. But the *for whom* they're not generally interested in.

The curators who work for museums are within the system of the art world. They know very well what they're doing, how they're doing it. *For whom* is the larger public, the community of curators, the intellectual community, the market.

In my view you're more likely to find curators sympathetic to the *what* and *how* than the *for whom*. Interestingly, this also mirrors the way these artists produce. We should therefore think of them not as *outsiders*, but as artists using different languages, which is not necessarily the language codified by the current critical trends.

MoE: That does not sound like a traditional curator to me! They may appreciate this work, but they still see it as a different thing. It is not fine art by a fine artist.

I am intrigued by the idea that the commissioning process may lie at the root of the conflict. That division must have started when people first paid for work to be made, whether they were the church, the state or the upper classes. That in turn became the high, ending up in important buildings or private homes. The rest became the low.

Over the years, we as a society have become more sophisticated, educated and open to what can be included in the high. The high became more democratic. African art was a challenge, we seem to accept it now. Tribal art and aboriginal art became ritual, they got included and put to one side in that way.

Yet the things we're talking about here are not rituals. They're not traditional practices. They're uniquely individual and while they tick all the boxes of what we expect from art, they're excluded from our definition because they lack formal intention. They are not art.

PC: That's because the people who make the definition of art are part of a system. The patrons of today speak to a market which is sustained by museums and critics. It is a huge machine and it's brutal. It has to guarantee a product that people understand so that there can be market discrepancy and different values. The artists in these workshops are only marginally touched by the market, if at all. Ultimately the system of art is not ready to accept something that puts in doubt what art lives on, which is the *for whom*.

MoE: The only way to create change is by action. Ask the average person if they like art, they refer to what this system has presented to them. They tend not to think about someone with a disability making art in a room. Yet if you put that same work in front of them, they're engaged, they're moved, it becomes *art*.

PC: That person has a much simpler notion of what art is. They have no context. That person is fundamentally not a gate-keeper.

The desire to clean the world from whoever does not conform is also connected to this issue. It is the philosophical idea about how the Western world perceives itself and what it considers valuable. The art world simply doesn't want to include people with disabilities.

MoE: It's a valid point; yet **Exhibition #4** is not about disability. It is about inviting the public to consider creative work which has not been substantially considered before, which is because the current definition of art seems to be one of exclusion.

PC: Of course it is about exclusion! When we talk about people with disabilities, their exclusion in the art world only reflects their

exclusion in wider society. The same people who are extremely liberal about many things in the world, may not be liberal about people with disabilities. I remember before my son was born, family planning services in Philadelphia asked me whether my family had a history of disability and whether, if the child was born disabled, we would like to abort. How can we expect all artists to be given an equal voice with society feeling this way?

MoE: *Voice* seems to be such an important word, because this work tends to be all about individual voices. As for *art*, it is flawed as a term, but whether we like it or not, it is the term we have. Its relationship to the creative gesture is taken for granted, which is why a partial re-definition seems an important step forward.

PC: If people outside of the context perceive this as art, then art it is - even if it's unintentional. Duchamp said art is what you perceive it to be. If the intentionality is not in the maker, then it is in the perceiver.

MoE: Is it enough to rely on the perceiver? It seems like a huge shift to me!

PC: It is certainly something that rocks the system from the bottom. The means of production of art are not in the hands of the artists. Art is still being determined by the market, the critics and the collectors who keep these artists out by general consensus.

MoE: Which is why the definition must widen. Back to the man or woman on the street: if they are given the right to say that this is *art*, then they will do so. Suddenly the gates come crashing down!

[END]

2nd July 2011

London, England/Athens, Greece

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