The Museum of Everything
Exhibition #4

Conversation with Sir Ken Robinson

Sir Ken Robinson
b 1950 (Liverpool, England)
Sir *Ken Robinson* PhD is an author, speaker, educator and advisor on education and the development of creativity. Former director of The Arts in Schools Project and former chairman of Artswork (both 1985/9) and the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1998), Robinson's presentations at TED conferences have been viewed by many millions online.

[START]

MoE: Sir Ken Robinson, you're one of the few people I felt could help me analyse the context of the work in our current show at The Museum of Everything.

KR: Like you, my whole premise is that creativity is everywhere; and it's not only everywhere, but compulsive. What you're doing, bringing attention and light to work from every quarter, is really important.

There's an interesting parallel with music. A huge amount of vernacular, local and folk music is produced outside the music industry by people for their own purposes, also poetry. It's not happened to the same extent in the visual arts. There's a great substratum of creative work here that's not been revealed to people.

MoE: The idea behind this current show is that creativity should be privileged, respected and curated, no matter how its makers are perceived. These are artists and their different ways of seeing their interior and exterior worlds can educate us visually. That to me seems sort of ground-breaking.

I wondered if we might talk about creativity, art and language. I am thinking about whether creativity precedes language, how the urge to make or do something, to be or think creatively, manifests itself and why.

KR: The earth is estimated to be 4.5 billion years old. Modern human beings, our species, emerged only about 50,000 years ago, a blink of an eye in planetary terms. For most of our history we seem to have lived very harmoniously with nature. But around 300 years ago we took off like a rocket especially in terms of technology and we're now endangering the whole balance of an eco-system. Our population has also gone from a billion in the 1750s to 7 billion today. It may peak at around 10 billion.

Why have we become so dominant? My answer is the power of imagination. We have the unique ability as human beings, unlike other species, to step outside our immediate circumstances; to bring to mind things that aren't present to our senses. In imagination we can re-visit the past, understand other points of view and anticipate the future.

Imagination underpins all the practical powers of creativity. You can be imaginative all day long, but to be creative you have to do or make something. Imagination underpins all of our extraordinary powers of symbolic representation that are the roots of language, the arts and the sciences. As human beings we don't only experience the world directly,

we think about our experiences through patterns of ideas and conceptions: we are able to theorise about them, to develop frameworks of concepts and values which are embedded and elaborated in verbal languages, in mathematics, sciences, the arts and the rest.

MoE: The question is perhaps whether these artists have that same power and imaginative intelligence?

KR: I have always argued that our intelligence is multi-layered. Our education systems, and particularly those in Western cultures, have tended to ghettoise certain types of intelligence as being more important than others. Overlaid onto that are the distinctions that people have come to make in the past couple of hundred years between the arts and the sciences.
When painters are painting, they are not translating a sentence into imagery - they are thinking visually. Musicians aren't compensating for a lack of verbal vocabulary, they are expressing ideas that can only be rendered in music. There is a wonderful example - I think it was Mahler - who was playing a new piece of music. A student sat at the back of the room and at the end of it he said: *Maestro, this was wonderful, thank you very much. What is it about?* Mahler said: *Oh, it's about this* and then he played it over again. If he could have put it into words, he would have done that.

MoE: Music and the visual arts for people with intellectual disabilities seem to be all about non-verbal thinking. They're forms of communication, although they may not always be for a specific purpose.

When I look at a painting of a landscape by one of our artists, it might seem strange and abstract at first, gridded and mathematical, not a landscape I recognise. I won't necessarily know what's that means or what it is saying, whether that's actually how this person sees the world, or whether they are trying to express something else, but there is communication of an internal experience that is not going to come out any other way.

KR: We tend to judge intellectual ability by very narrow criteria. What we think of as academic ability is largely related to writing, mathematics and articulate speech. If you have a physical disability, where it's difficult to articulate words easily, or if you're deaf, or sight-impaired, or can't control your limbs properly, people tend too often to assume you are intellectually impaired as well.

I have worked with people with all sorts of intellectual disabilities. I was in special school myself, because I had polio as a kid. There are many sorts of intelligences - and people who have obvious disabilities may have strengths in other areas that aren't measured by the standard criteria. People who can't communicate in conventional ways may have

highly developed perceptions and sensibilities that they simply can't externalise.

One of the arguments for the arts for people with disabilities is that they provide many different forms of communication and expression. There are some things you can put into words and some things you can't. Some things are better not represented in words, they are better expressed in music or dance!

MoE: I definitely see that from my own experience. Yet there seems to be a lack of appreciation for this genre of art as a means of communication and expression, where a so-called disability can be an ability, that is to say, an ability to see the world in a different way.

KR: The arts exemplify a much richer idea of ability and intelligence. For example, there is a constant risk that people with a physical difficulty or handicap can become branded by it. They are seen not as a person who is deaf, but as a deaf person, characterised by the one particular feature.

One of the reasons we have such a broad view of disability is because we have such a narrow view of ability. I argue for a much richer conception of ability. When you do that, disabilities take their relative places in people's lives. We all cope with particular things, we all have stuff we have to deal with - it's just that in some cases the challenge may be more obvious than in others.

MoE: Adam Phillips, the psychoanalyst, has said as much to me. To paraphrase, we are all disabled, it's just a question of degree.

The issue we face in terms of acceptance of this work as *art* seems to be that the definition of art usually demands an intention to create art. Artists in this area are not always able to verbalise that kind of intention, so they immediately get lumped into some sort of separate category and rarely curated with other work.

Art museums tend to show fine art by fine artists. Yet this stuff is not that. The lack of inclusion shows a level of prejudice, even if unintentionally so. I'm wondering why there is such resistance?

KR: The museums are there to celebrate a particular form of professional practice. What The Museum of Everything is implicitly doing, not just through its work with artists with disabilities, but with all that it does, is stating that what counts as art should not just be the preserve of professional artists or of what goes on within the walls of museums and galleries.

MoE: How does that connect to the relationship between creativity and

art?

KR: Creativity is the application of imagination. Often when we're creating we work in representative forms: in language or music or whatever. In the arts we are especially concerned with meanings. You can show a painting to other species and they'd simply see it as a random configuration of colours. We humans see meanings: we aim to interpret and read the works of other people, to grasp their significance.

Jacob Bronowski talks about the relationship between the hand and the mind. A huge amount of creative work isn't just internal thinking, it's converting it into practical objects, whether we're painting or playing instruments, writing with pens or constructing machines we can work with.

The great movements in human intelligence have been brought about by that conjunction of powerful imaginations and articulate limbs. All of those have evolved together. They have changed the way our brain works and the way we think. We're not all lying in still contemplation. We spend our time doing and making things with our hands. That relationship of thought and action in the arts as in the sciences is very powerful.

Being creative is about acquiring skills and languages. There are disciplines, rigours and patterns and commonalities, which apply whether you're talking about the arts, the sciences or technology. Why do we paint? Why do we create music? Why do we produce poetry and do sculpture?

People were doing those things long before the Tate decided to apply selective criteria to them. In all human cultures there have been visual representations of instruments, of people moving, dancing, decorating themselves. They weren't doing these things because they got a grant from the Arts Council or because they'd get hung in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition!

It's only relatively recently that the arts have become professionalised as we know them now and that specific institutions have been created to present them. The emergence of separate professions of artists and curators has contributed in many ways to the separation of the arts from people's everyday lives. In part that's why we now have this distinction between amateur and professional art.

MoE: That's an historic division, the separation of high and low. What you're describing is an artisan who is co-opted into becoming an artist. In the other direction you've got all the other artists who have been negated as a result. The irony is that I see this same segregation

existing as strongly, if not more strongly today.

KR: There was a strong movement in the 1970s and 1980s in *community arts*. The Drury Lane Arts Lab and other initiatives were about democratising art practice. The debate about high art, popular art and community art, about where you draw the lines and whether we should be drawing any lines at all, has been raging for a long time in cultural policy and practice. There was a book written in the 1940s by Franz Cizek called *Child Art*. He argued that children produce works of art that are not poor versions of adult art: they are produced for their own unique purposes with their own aesthetic.

There are now many cultural filters on what counts as art, including the gatekeepers in the institutions that set themselves up as the arbiters of taste. Against that, there's a long tradition of people agitating for a larger conception of arts practice, who feel that it shouldn't just be preserve of professional artists. The fact that some people do devote themselves professionally to the arts because it's their personal passion doesn't mean that what others produce on a so-called amateur basis is nonsense!

There's always been a traffic between what's considered to be high art and the popular or community arts. If you look at the work of Picasso in Cubism, a lot of that was inspired by traditional African art forms.

MoE: Which brings us back to Dubuffet and his own art brut story.

KR: What's your ambition for The Museum of Everything? You started it by having your own interest, which has got deeper as you've gone further in. You've had a great response from the press. What's that telling you?

MoE: It's shown me that a creative approach to presenting this kind of work to the public has a far greater chance of success and communication than a formalist, traditional approach.

KR: So where do you hope to get to with this show? Presumably in there is a kind of philosophy?

MoE: We're discovering the philosophy through the process of doing. The museum is an installation. I wouldn't go as far as to say it's art, but it's a very creative process. The ability to deal with the presentation of this work creatively and not have a fixed idea seems extremely important.

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