

'No One is Normal'
by Rinskje Koelewijn

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The wandering museum of James Brett shows art from outsiders and autodidacts. "Creativity is a human right."

With his Museum of **Everything** James Brett shows art from people whose work is generally not exhibited in a gallery or museum. A brief introduction to the little man who will soon be rushing into the café of the Kunsthal in Rotterdam and in the same breath order a double espresso, a coke, a sparkling water and a fish soup, and will then talk continuously. It is James Brett, he comes from London, is silent about his age, but was born in 1967 and for approximately five years he has been the director of his own museum: The Museum of **Everything**. It is not a building with art in it where you pay to enter. His museum is a traveling circus, which he takes along to museums in Paris, Moscow and Venice to show works by artists who in the official sense are not allowed to be called artists.



The artists in the Museum of **Everything** are soloists and self-taught. They are outsiders, sometimes recluses, or to put it nicely, 'independent'. **Walter Potter**, who organised a tea party with kittens and squirrels he stuffed himself. Or **Willem van Genk**, an unworldly hermit who translated his fears and concerns into pencil drawings.

Not art made for the public or the market, not work that has inevitably ended up in a gallery or museum. In the seventies it was called *art brut* or *outsider art*. Famous artists (Jean Dubuffet, Picasso, Duchamp) were inspired by it.

But don't start James Brett on the subject of outsiders. He flares up. "Very insulting. The term outsider art assumes an inside. And that is exactly what he hates. The small circle of art snobs who say: 'this is art, but that is not'. The works in the Museum of **Everything** are art, the people who make it are artists. At least, that is what James Brett thinks. And many others now also do. In Amsterdam the Hermitage Museum will open the Outsider Art Museum in mid-March. And in Rotterdam the Kunsthal opens its doors to James Brett and one hundred artists from the 5th of March.

On James Brett's sleeveless, woollen jacket is a bright red badge with "To hell with Hitler". "Vintage", he says. It is an American propaganda badge from 1940. He sighs and sits down. In immaculate English: "I should have stayed in bed." Or no, he says: "In bath. Yes, that would have been lovely." He then blithely reaches for the menu in Dutch and orders "only fluids". This morning he arrived "without breakfast" in Rotterdam from London and is now busy installing at the Kunsthall. The problem is that his team is still in London, when it is widely known that "the most unstable, least suitable person to take important decisions is the director himself."

A one-man army

James Brett is a one-man army, armed to the teeth with words. He speaks for and on behalf of art makers without a voice and he does not like to be interrupted. "I talk, I make contact, and then something happens." Consequently his artists are for instance hung in Tate Modern in London or, as in 2011, in the windows of Selfridges. "I had a brief chat with the head of the department store". He says: "Nice. Why don't you refurbish one of our shop windows?" I say, "I was thinking more of all the windows?" Four thousand square meters of artworks, two million people who saw them. James Brett: "What does the art critic of The Guardian write?" He counts on his fingers. "One: a department store is not a museum. Two: shoppers are not museum visitors. Three: this is not art. And Four: These are not artists." And then, he says, he became radical. Or, to put it succinctly: "Fuck all."

Who determines that art is only art if it is made by someone who calls himself an artist? Can something not just be beautiful or special, or mind-blowing? Look at the work of [Nek Chand Saini](#), a road construction worker from India. He made a magnificent sculpture park out of reclaimed material. Take [Minnie Evans](#), an African-American woman who worked as a janitor and killed her time painting. Her work now hangs in major museums. [Henry Darger](#), again an outsider artist who has become famous. His landlord discovered on his deathbed a 15,000-page manuscript in which he illustrated what he could never have told in words about his childhood, full of beatings and abuse. The Mexican artist [Martin Ramirez](#), now world famous for his intricate drawings, made his work in a hospital. The Swiss [Adolf Wölfli](#) spent half of his life in a closed psychiatric ward. His work was discovered by the psychiatrist on duty.

The artists he just mentioned are all "as dead as dodos." But what about a more recent discovery of his; [Marianne Schipaanboord](#), Dutch. Her work filled an entire window at Selfridges. "She came to the opening with a little army of helpers." She is spastic and deaf-mute, but James would never put it so rudely. "She is not disabled, she has a disability. That is something fundamentally different." He doesn't ask for pity for the artists, no one has to find their art nice. "Assess the art itself. Their biography gives at most an extra dimension."

A prison cell can be a workshop, as well as a hospital room, a garden shed, a cellar. Art is an attitude, he says. "It is the product of a creative nature. You are born with it. It is not cognitive functions

which determine that what you make is art, but talent. "People do it because they feel the urge to express themselves. Maybe it's not meant to be art, but that is the unintended result." James Brett counts once again on his fingers. Now he tells what he thinks of contemporary artists (with a capital letter) and artistic training. One: "They paint ideas rather than art." Two: "They create surface, not depth". And three: "They need words to disguise the absence of meaning." Softly speaking to himself he checks whether he has listed all his arguments.

Pause button

I'm looking for a moment to press the pause button. I want to know who he is and why he's so obsessed with outsider art. His brown eyes light up behind a translucent spectacle frame. "I am not going to be personal ..." I do. Does he have someone in his family who is disabled ...? "Wrong, wrong, wrong". "Disabled ..", he repeats. "Aren't we all disabled? Do we not all have a mental disorder? Nobody is normal and no one is an exception." I meant: does he happen to have an artistic brother, an autistic family member, or is he himself ... "No", "he insists. "And I'm not an artist either. Nothing in my biography explains my current mission." He does not come from the art world, he says. Which world then? "London. Jewish family. Very loving. Conservative, but not religious. After school I quickly ran away from home. To America."

In California he worked in the film industry. Feature films. Adverts. Nothing special or successful. "If you don't mind, I would now like to talk about my museum again ..." he says with British politeness. Before I can object: "Yes, I will. That's what you like."

In America, he says, he was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. "Black artists never got a place in a museum. Why not? Because they had no formal training. Because art academies wouldn't accept them. "Do you understand that, in this way, the art-historical framework actually makes racist choices?" He thinks that creativity is a human right. Everyone should have an equal chance to express talent. He himself became charmed by folk art, folk art from the American South. In Louisiana, he met a couple who made human figures out of twigs and branches. "Cute and crazy. But not art, they thought." He bought a pair. Later he would acquire more finds. "All of my walls, the ceiling, everything in my house was full." Was? "I no longer have a home." He is, he says, always traveling.

"Maybe it's not meant to be art, but that is the unintended result."

I ask with what money he buys art. He folds his arms and says, "I do not want to talk about money." Silence. "Money is not important. I can buy a brilliant work in Herenplaats [a Rotterdam studio for artists with a mental disorder] for 150 euros". Do you think that's a lot? "The value of art cannot be expressed in figures", he says. "The price of the Mona Lisa says nothing about the painting." Make any inquiries to art dealers and you'll learn that James Brett has a personal fortune. His museum has been set up as a charity and is supported by businesses, individuals and income from the gallery and online shop.

In 2013, he was at Biennale in Venice with his travelling Museum of **Everything**. One of the biggest international art events. The theme of the event: Encyclopedic Palace. What did hundreds of thousands of visitors see there? 'Outsider art' everywhere. "It seemed like the whole art world jumped on it. It felt like I was deprived of something. That annoyed me. But at the same time it irritated me that I found it irritating."

Confusing, he finds it. "My father who is very practical and cautious, always told me, the clumsy, reckless son, that I shouldn't want to be a pioneer. Was he right after all?" Maybe, I say to cheer him up, that his missionary work for outsider art has been too successful and what was outside is now inside? He nods. "I have decided that the museum and I are a good match." After a three-year closure the Museum of **Everything** now opens its doors in Rotterdam.

IN BRIEF

Born: 6am, London, 1967

Location: "Nothing permanent."

Marital status: "Civil, but not married."

Education: "Too little, too late."

First job: "Child labor at my father's office at the weekend."

Sports: "A run through traffic at awkward times."

Book: the Book of Revelations

Film: Monsieur Hulot's Holidays by Jacques Tati

Art: the cave paintings of Chauvet

Music: Ornette Coleman

Indispensable: stress and irrational love