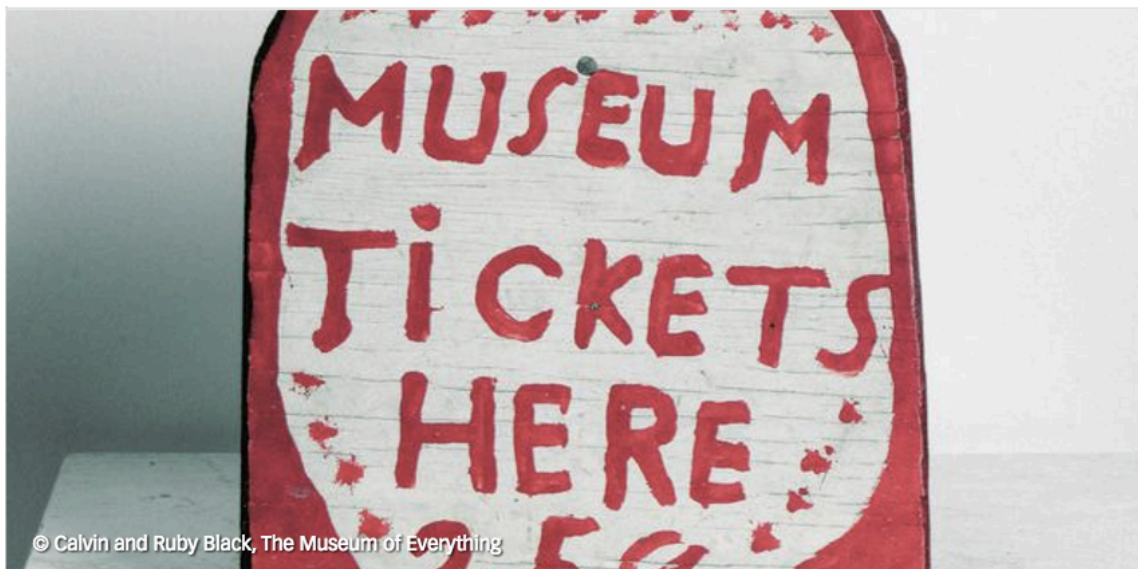


## Accidental art

Are they curiosities or real art? The headstrong Museum of **Everything** shows outsider art. Now to be seen in Rotterdam.

by Anna van Leeuwen

03.03.16



There were wooden signs, with only 'EVERYTHING' and an arrow on them. Informative enough to arouse curiosity. In 2009, such signs lured thousands of Frieze art fair visitors from London's Regent Park to a vacant property nearby.

There a small temporary museum had seemingly set up shop: The Museum of **Everything**. The art [on display] was only by auto-didacts, mostly unseen talent that has sometimes been a major influence on artists who have become well known. Often not created in a studio but in a living room or hospital. Rarely had the artist the art world or the art market as target audience. The atmosphere in the museum was cozy and friendly: a voluntary donation on entry, afterwards gray ladies who poured tea from flea market tableware.

This intimate museum proved popular. It remained open several months longer. A year later Exhibition #2 and then #3 followed. The museum turned up in Venice and in Moscow. In the meantime the museum has turned to Exhibition #6. Initiator and museum director James Brett has mounted his biggest exhibition to date in Kunsthal Rotterdam. More than a thousand drawings, paintings, sculptures and collages have been given a place in thirty galleries. Controlled chaos it is. "You know what's even worse than failure?" He asks in the midst of his monster project. 'Success', he answers himself. The success that he had not expected a decade ago.

Brett was a filmmaker when he traveled through the United States and became interested in American folk art and other work by makers who did

not go through the usual route of art school and gallery. This "unofficial" art, which often cannot be called art according to the insiders (but for example, is called "obsession" or "therapy"), continued to fascinate him. He went on to collect himself. Thus emerged the plan for an exhibition.

That plan was already years into his head when he saw a newspaper photo of a man in a room full of debris. "William Brett in the museum of everything", said the caption. This accidental namesake turned out to be a local celebrity on the British Isle of Wight. Children from the neighborhood had baptized the house of the elderly eccentric: 'museum of everything'. Brett looked him up: "He was a hoarder, had even collected toilet seats, but also made small wooden sculptures. For example, a piece of wood which he painted black and named 'penguin'.

James Brett was intrigued by the name museum of everything. 'It seemed the perfect name to readjust the term 'outsider art', which he hates so much, 'It simply reduces the art to what it isn't, and so confirms the idea that this art may not belong to the art world. He therefore asked William Brett, "Would you mind it if I opened a London branch of your museum?' And so it happened.

The characteristic cobbled-together atmosphere has remained. And here is where the museum belongs according to Brett: "This art is created in an intimate setting, you must not show it in a clinical space. That's fake anyway. You could sell a dog turd if you put it on a pedestal in a chic gallery.'

He flouts the rules of the art world. He is not going to organise his exhibition chronologically or geographically. Instead, he points to a room he calls 'black and white'. Here hang pencil drawings by the retired Iranian car mechanic **Davood Koochaki**: figures drawn so densely that they form strange gray shadows. In addition, a giant sheet of paper on which the German **Harald Stoffers** wrote a letter to his mother (in part illegible). In the swirling and wavy sentences one can recognise such words as 'Dear Mom'. Opposite hang drawings by the New York artist **Alexis Derrick Coard**, which form very detailed male portraits, where beards especially (according to the artist, a reference to the divine) and substantial genitals stand out.

"This art is a universal phenomenon," says Brett. If one of his artists has a psychiatric disorder or physical disability, that doesn't interest him as such, "I will show that creativity is freely available to anyone. I find it more interesting to see how the self-taught Mexican artist **Martin Ramirez** conveys elements from his memory and Mexican culture in his drawings. And did you know that the American artist **Janet Sobel** (1894-1968) worked with the drip technique already before Jackson Pollock? And that Pollock visited her studio?

In the Museum of Everything Brett tries to bring this parallel history of art into the spotlight. Yet he did not fill his exhibition only with unknown names. He has dedicated a whole room to **Henry Darger**, now world famous, then accidentally discovered by his landlord Nathan Lerner.

Even in his conception of Darger's work Brett is unorthodox: "I disagree with any official interpretation. These are not loose fantasies. It is a story that Darger's tragic and traumatic childhood portrays.' For the exhibition Brett brought together drawings with which the story is to be reconstructed. 'Some drawings were cut into pieces and unfortunately scattered. Here they are reunited for the first time.'

Although Brett's strange museum conquered a place in a short time, he has also met with resistance. One year after the success of Exhibition #1 there followed a big disappointment: Tate Modern did not want to accept a gift of work by **Henry Darger** from the widow of Nathan Lerner. It simply wasn't art. A few years later a critic of the Guardian did not have a good word to say about an exhibition that Brett mounted in Selfridges and he disqualified the artists.

The opinionated museum director has become even more militant through these rejections, he says: "All that conceptual jargon they are fond of in contemporary art always comes down to the same thing. Art is a way to find your own place in the world. You can see it here.'