



The compulsion to create: ‘outsider art’ at MONA’s The Museum of Everything

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Untitled (all), Hans-Jörg Georgi, 2010–15, Courtesy of The Museum of Everything. Moorilla Gallery, Courtesy of Atelier Goldstein and The Museum of Everything (installation by Lutz Pillong), CC BY

Who is an artist and when does a fabricated object become art? The 200 individuals represented in **The Museum of Everything** exhibition at MONA in Hobart focus our attention on these questions. On the website they are described as “untrained, unintentional, undiscovered and unclassifiable artists of modern times”. They are hermits, governesses, housewives, former miners, taxidermists and ex-soldiers, working in painting, sculpture, and an extraordinary range of other media.

While these people may “unintentionally” be making something we might want to describe as art, they are the most focused, driven and compulsive group of makers we are ever likely to encounter, and there is nothing that is unintended in the things they fabricate. Indeed they make these images and objects because they must depict in some form what is most important to them in their lives.

After an exhilarating journey through 30 rooms and many corridors of remarkable images and objects, these questions about the nature of art and the credentials of artists reach a critical mass. Finally, you arrive in a backyard courtyard, entered through a fly-wire screen door. Painted on the wall is a call-out

Author



Ted Snell

Professor, Chief Cultural Officer, Cultural Precinct, University of Western Australia

for more people who might be included in some future exhibition. It asks, are you a self-taught or secret artist? Is your home your own personal gallery? Have you invented a private language? If so contact **The Museum of Everything**.

This last advertisement alerts us to the real conundrum of encountering so many unique individuals and creative practices, who likely never expected us to engage with the things they have made. If they are secret artists, who have developed a private language and wish to keep their activities to themselves, what are we doing prying into their work and their lives?

Can we even call what they make “art”, in the way we conventionally define it, if there is no intention to communicate with an audience?



Untitled (all), Bogdan Zietek, 1970–2010, Courtesy of The Museum of Everything. Moorilla Gallery, CC BY

Outsiders, or just artists?

Other writers have struggled to explain the remarkable work produced by men and women for whom the act of creation is fundamental to their existence. After the second world war, the French artist Jean Dubuffet coined the label **art brut**, or raw art, to describe the amazing work he collected from individuals incarcerated in institutions or those that made art privately to fulfil a deep need.

In the 1970s, Roger Cardinal, a British academic, opted for **outsider art** as a more useful catch-all for artists working on the margins of the art world. Others have grouped the work of this army of practitioners under classifications such as naïve art, visionary art and folk art.

Whatever box we put them in, and none is entirely satisfactory, the artists whose works adorn the walls of MONA are clearly extraordinary.



Courtesy of The Museum of Everything. Moorilla Gallery, CC BY

These objects have been removed from the homes, hospitals, and workshops where they were made. We are forced to make decisions about how to approach and read them and how to react after engaging with them. We must learn to lift the filters we normally have in place in an art gallery and really look hard at works that break rules, disrupt expectations and offer us insights into the lives of remarkable human beings.

Creative lives

Each of these artists has remade their world through a physical engagement with the tools of art, and because of that, we have a window into some extraordinary personal narratives.

There is **Henry Darger** the hospital custodian from Chicago who returned home each evening to continue working on his manuscript, “The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion”. He is represented in the exhibition by a series of consecutive panels of drawings illustrating his magnum opus, a sprawling and tender series of traced images woven together with pencil and watercolour.

Adolf Wölfli was disturbed and violent, living most of his life in the Waldau Clinic, a psychiatric hospital in Bern. He drew compulsively and like Darger set out to create a massive literary work, in his case a rambling autobiography that saw his gradual elevation to the Sainthood as “St Adolf II”. His dense, complicated and intense drawings in pencil fill the page, leaving no space inactive.

In 2007, I had the opportunity to meet **Stan Hopewell**, who is represented in this exhibition by his masterwork “The Last Supper”. The task appeared so great, so necessary and so profound that to embark on it Stan required divine guidance. When his wife Joyce became ill, Stan made a pact with his God that he would continue to write and paint to celebrate God’s Love while Joyce remained alive.

Over the next five years, he filled his house with paintings, which he believed were made with the



Untitled (all), Alikhan Abdollahi, c. 2010, Paper mache. Moorilla Gallery, CC BY

assistance of an “an unseen Angel” and wrote pages upon pages of a stream-of-consciousness manifesto about his life and his beliefs. The day Joyce died, Stan stopped writing and painting. His fantastical works incorporate the events of his life, his family, his abiding faith and current events. They were agglomerations that evolved, each addition adding to the complexity and the scale of the work, incorporating angels with flapping wings, illuminated with lights and adorned with his wife’s knickknacks.

Ambition and obsession

Darger, Wölfli, and Hopewell are only three of the human stories from the vast array that lie behind the over 2,000 objects hung throughout the temporary gallery space of MONA. Of course, they add a dimension to our reading of the work, but it is also true that the imagery is so powerful, so

disruptive, so fresh and confronting that it commands our attention.



Untitled (all), Calvin and Ruby Black, 1955–1972, Courtesy of The Museum of Everything. CC BY

What makes this work so arresting is the urgency of its making. These are images and objects that had to be made, that could no longer be repressed. Whether intended for others or created for solitary contemplation, they have an intensity that draws us deep into their fabricated worlds.

Obsessive detail is a common stylistic trait. Scale and ambition are others. Hans-Jörg Georgi’s amazing flight of aircraft, designed for escape from an uninhabitable planet, spiral through the gallery space in a

torrent of energy. Their fuselages, carefully constructed from cardboard and tape, are maniacally compulsive, showing each detail of the engines and propellers, the wing mechanisms, passenger decks and windows. Both prophetic and wildly funny, this work, like so many others in the exhibition, requires a shift in consciousness to fully absorb its significance.

What better place to confront these works than in MONA, a space that has rethought the modern museum and helped us to re-imagine the experience of engaging with artworks? The works are set within rooms designed to create the sense of a slightly dilapidated home-museum: wallpapered, sporadically architraved, cluttered with objects and glass display cases.

It is James Brett, the founder of The Museum of Everything and curator of this show, whose guiding intelligence is everywhere present. Each room is themed. Carefully positioned works draw you through into the next room of wonders where new relationships and variations on old themes play out.

Like every passionate collection, the compulsion to overwhelm is never resisted, but strangely this leads to an insatiable appetite for more. This is most definitely an exhibition that both requires and demands multiple visits.

Which brings us back to those big questions: is it art, and should we be viewing it? Perhaps the best way to describe the individuals whose works fill the Museum of Everything is that they separately and as a group pose questions about the nature of art and challenge us to ponder what it means to be an artist. Significantly, through this process, they highlight the sense of our own humanity and showcase the qualities we ascribe to humanness. What could be more rewarding, inspiring and affirming?



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The Museum of Everything will showing at MONA until April 2 2018.

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