

# TRAVELLING SHOW

We hitch up with the Museum of Everything on its 3,500km trip across Russia in search of undiscovered artists

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## CONTAIN YOURSELF

This page, the museum's pit stop in Kazan, one of the stops on its Russia roadtrip to find 'undiscovered, untrained and untrained artists'

Opposite, Ilya Altkovskiy, or the doll artist, who was chosen to feature in the final exhibition in Moscow





Leaning casually against the wall, on grubby floorboards, inside a precariously sloping freight container, on a slightly seedy patch of parkland between derelict redbrick buildings and the concrete monotony of a Soviet-era canal, is Picasso's *Guernica*. Not the *Guernica*, obviously. But not a straightforward copy, either. Rather, it's a smaller relief version, in which Cubist forms and bits of blue-black colour jut outwards at odd angles. It's a curious, intriguing object, particularly so as it's accompanied by a similarly 3D version of another well-known painting, from completely the opposite end of the cultural spectrum – those irredeemably kitsch, faux-Edwardian beach dancers by Britain's best-selling poster artist, Jack Vettriano.

Both works are by a woman in her mid-forties, Irina Alekseeva, dressed imperiously in what might be called high-gypsy chic. She calls them 'doll interpretations', explaining that she began making clothes for dolls as a hobby over 20 years ago, before moving on to making her own dolls, incorporating them into diorama scenes and versions of famous paintings. She places another work on the table in front of her: a glass-panelled box, held together by a rickety wooden frame, containing dozens of cavorting, brightly dressed doll figures. 'Traditional wedding in Ural mountains,' she explains. She's a wedding planner in her day job here in Yekaterinburg. The sides of the box are plastered with photocopies of texts and images showing real-life weddings and traditional costumes, so it's clear she's trying to be as accurate as possible in representing the local folk customs. In short, her vitrine is a form of ethnography, a museological display designed to educate as much as entertain. 'Da,' she confirms in broken English, 'in museum, is called "mini-museum".' She gestures at her

surroundings – a second freight container hung with paintings, artists queuing to have their work assessed by critics and curators, work being professionally photographed and catalogued – 'is museum within museum.'

Yekaterinburg, the Eastern-most city in the European half of Russia, is the starting point for a month-long tour of the country by the Museum of Everything, the organisation that champions, as its own mission statement puts it, 'undiscovered, unintentional, and untrained artists' – in other words, self-taught artists working outside the mainstream art world. The tour functions as a sort of roadshow-cum-talent-search, advertising for artists that fit the bill, and gathering and exhibiting new pieces as it goes from city to city. Judging by the curious expressions on the faces of most passers-by in Yekaterinburg, it's the first time they've been exposed to this sort of art. The ethos of the doll artist's vitrine, then, applies equally well to the task of the museum as a whole. To entertain – with its truck painted bright red, like some sort of oversized children's toy, and its converted containers, stuffed to the brim with weird and wacky objects, not to mention providing shade from the scorching August sun. And also, to educate, because the fundamental idea of the Museum of Everything is to show that this sort of work, no matter how strange, no matter how unsophisticated, untrained or eccentric its makers, is still worthy of serious artistic consideration.

'There's some awareness of naive art here in Russia,' says James Brett, the founder and driving force behind the Museum of Everything, 'but it's always segregated off in separate museums, so it's seen as less important than the work of trained, "proper" artists. Yet at the same time there's this massively important history of making objects >>

by hand, coming from folk and craft traditions. It's one of the main reasons we wanted to do a tour here. And, of course, Russia has produced some absolutely outstanding outsider artists. So we're hoping to discover enough really good artists to change people's minds about naïve or outsider art, whatever you want to call it – artists who are able to invent whole new worlds, who obsessively pursue their own line of thinking.'

This is what makes someone like Alekseeva, the doll artist, so fascinating. Not only does she have literally hundreds of doll-themed pieces at home in her apartment, but there's also a well-developed concept linking them. After all, many of her 3D homages, including *Guernica*, don't contain actual dolls, yet they're still called 'doll interpretations'. The idea uses doll-ness as a metaphor, turning something into a model of itself, creating a miniature, more tangible version. Another wonderful discovery, made earlier that day, is daytime street portraitist Leonid Lugovskh, who also makes complicated, stunningly beautiful designs for what he calls a 'perpetual motion machine', as well as a system of *aura*-like, quasi-mystical 'chromosome portraits'. Yet for him all these sorts of work belong together, sometimes literally on the same sheet of paper, the overall idea being one of ever deepening levels of artistic representation, of penetrating further into fundamental life structures.

'These people are artists,' Brett emphasises. 'Their work is just as meaningful as works made by mainstream contemporary artists. What we're trying to do at the Museum of Everything is provide a heightened platform for those makers who are outside the usual, narrow conception of what art is.' He's done it before with previous shows. The first iteration of the Museum of Everything – in a labyrinthine, dilapidated factory in Primrose Hill in London – featured some of the greatest outsider artists in the world, and was largely responsible for kick-starting a boom in the field. Just as successful was a breathtaking survey exhibition of artists with developmental disabilities, which occupied the basement of Selfridges department store.

The Russian tour, however, is a tougher proposition. For one thing, there's the sheer scale of the project: from Yekaterinburg to Kazan, in the heart of Tartar country, then Nizhny Novgorod, St Petersburg, and finally Moscow, almost 3,500km in total. The museum spends two to three days in each city, and with such a constant stream of people presenting their work, it stays open until nearly midnight every night. But more than any of that, it's the radically different



THE MUSEUM OF EVERYTHING'S EPIC ROUTE THROUGH RUSSIA



#### PAINT WORKS

Artist Ilya Farkhodov, with his work, shot in one of the museum's freight containers, hung with paintings, and surrounded by artists queuing to have their pieces assessed by critics and curators

cultural context that makes everything much more complicated. To put it bluntly, Russia is pretty messed up when it comes to contemporary art – the result of years of Soviet dogma being suddenly replaced with an anything-goes, stylistic free-for-all. Despite vast amounts of money being pumped into Russian contemporary art in the form of art fairs, biennales and specialist galleries all over the world, no major, blue-chip stars have emerged. It still lacks the sense of an established artistic mainstream, and without that, without a defined territory of cultural 'insiderism', the position of 'outsider' loses definition, too. The danger is that Russian audiences may simply not see the relevance of what the museum stands for.

The issue is also a difficult one to disentangle for the various curators, collectors and critics – including, for one afternoon, this *Wallpaper* writer – who sit on the museum's judging panel, in an exalted position behind a table up in one of the converted containers. There's only time to give each artist a few minutes to explain their work, so how do you distinguish true outsiderism from the mere imitator, from someone painting in a faux-naïve style? Brett assures us that

we'll know it when we see it. Of course, it's pretty easy to tell what it absolutely isn't: melancholy fan-art by pop-star fixated adolescents; craft-y things in batik or ceramic; graphic, street art-type stuff, much of it extremely competent, but which simply doesn't belong here. Several rejectees receive friendly advice from Brett – when a woman who attempts academic, religious-themed works avers that, yes, she really ought to get proper artistic training, he replies that, on the contrary, what she should do is go inside herself more, paint what she truly feels.

Other cases are more complex. The final applicant of the day, a neerdy-looking television journalist in his thirties, brings along pages filled with thousands of what at first look like tiny, computer-generated images. In fact, they're meticulously, beautifully hand-painted designs for regiments of soldiers, created for a fantasy tabletop war game, which he's been working on since childhood. The debate that occupies the panel is whether this was a project ever intended for commercial release. For Brett, though, the issue doesn't matter, it captures the essence of 'unintentional' art. 'It's clearly never going to become an actual game, it's too obsessive, too vast and multifaceted. It's utterly mesmerising. We're definitely taking it to Moscow,' he decides.

Moscow, specifically, means the mighty Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, the sponsors of the regional tour. Having recently relocated to Gorky Park, Garage will be hosting a final exhibition of works in October, amassed during the tour – alongside those by already famous Russian outsider artists like the late Pavel Leonov, who painted schematic diagrams of Russian society, and Alexander Popanov, whose gun fixation resulted in ornate heraldic and mythological depictions. »



Equally tantalising is the prospect of what was to have been the exhibition venue itself, a temporary pavilion by Shigeru Ban, whose trademark is constructing buildings out of paper. On paper, as it were, Ban's design looks fantastic: its swooping, parabolic forms feel effortless and dynamic, yet at the same time manage to suggest a peaceful, almost cloistered atmosphere. On visiting the actual site, though, there's basically nothing to see. Despite the construction originally being scheduled for completion soon, at the time of writing only the cement foundations are in place.

Actually, what's most interesting about the site is what you don't see, namely, the former, famously insalubrious fairground area known as Luna Park. It's all been demolished as part of Garage's epic regeneration project – reshaping the entire eastern swathe of Gorky Park to once again make it safe for family use, and converting various derelict buildings into gallery spaces that will rival Tate Modern in size. And yet, all around the perimeter, there are strange, wistful traces of its previous incarnation: wooden pleasure boats that have been unceremoniously junked; a tangle of coloured lights caught in a hedge; a hand-painted sign advertising duck feed. It all feels slightly ironic – this displacement of low-end, tacky objects to make way for a high-concept, high-spec, big-money building project, only for the final result to end up housing the Museum of Everything's own celebration of weird, funky, fringe culture.

For Anton Below, the director of Garage, though, Ban's paper pavilion has more important connotations. "It is a light, fluid space, all about connections and the movement of ideas. The opposite of the stuffy, heavy exhibition spaces people often expect in Russian museums," he says. "You see, for many Russians naïve art is what they see when they go to their

Wallpaper\*



granny's house for the summer. So we have to show that this exhibition is something new, and that it comes from all of Russia, and is not just concentrated in Moscow."

This idea, that outsider art is something that can, perhaps uniquely, speak for all of Russia, is key. In Kazan, the Museum of Everything's judging panel is joined for a day by Alexei Turchin, a Moscow-based collector of naïve art, who has seen the market grow significantly in the past few years. "It's a cheap way of collecting contemporary art," he admits, "at a time when there are no really major Russian artists still active. But what's interesting is that naïve art is being bought by the same people who before were dealing in antiques and icons. So there's a sense that it could be a source of something big for Russia, something we can become known for, like icons, or abstract art in the 1920s."

In Kazan, however, the source is proving hard to locate. It's a strange, lugubrious city. For example, all the food in the shops is out of date. And that's a pretty good metaphor for the whole place, the pervasive feeling of being out of date, out of time, out of the loop. You might think that this, combined with its mix of Orthodoxy and Islam, would create ideal

#### TEAM EFFORT

Clockwise from top left, James Brett (centre), the founder and driving force behind the Museum of Everything; an art collector in Nizhny Novgorod; and the production and art assistants for the museum's gallery, Vladimir Gusev and Ivan Zhikov



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conditions to incubate outsider talent. But despite all the usual press promotion, attendance is thin, and only two more artists are added to the final Moscow list. "It's tricky," Brett says, "because the sort of people you want to come are also those least likely to be connected to the modern world. No one is completely isolated, though. Someone will have come across a great artist, and will spread the word about us. But it takes time."

Things pick up, thankfully, in Nizhny Novgorod. There's an elderly man who produces hundreds of intricate, near indecipherable drawings the size of postage stamps; and a street sweeper who obsessively depicts obscure, whimsical snippets of military history, such as a Nazi soldier taking a sip of Russian vodka and suddenly realising he's fighting for the wrong side. Best of all, and someone that Brett considers a major discovery, is a man who for the past 14 years has been making a daily painting of the local weather, in order to prove, across the thousands and thousands of beautiful resulting images, deep patterns and correlations.

Perhaps the difference is the location. The museum is parked in the city's kremlin, where a constant stream of newlyweds come to the church for a blessing, with some of that good luck inevitably rubbing off. More prosaically, the likeliest explanation is simply that word is starting to spread. Certainly, the feeling at the museum is that things are on a roll and that with work of such quality in the final exhibition, they really might be able to change the perception, the very institution of art in Russia. And in a country so unimaginably vast, with such remote regions, this is just the start of things. As Turchin rather nicely puts it, "There's a Klondike of undiscovered artists out there. This is just the first trickle of gold."\*

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