

# On being an outsider, *Christopher Kane* finds creativity at the Art Brut Center Gugging in Austria.

Text by Christopher Kane As told to Sarah Mower Photographs by Laurence Ellis

I've been talking about the influence of outsider art in my collections over the past couple of years since my mum died. [My sister] Tammy and I have felt like outsiders our whole life. Growing up in Newarthill, in Scotland—a small village background—we grew up around people who had been touched by madness; we're still raising it in our work. There was a woman we called Jan. She used to cut her own hair, wore the shortest skirts. She was insanely beautiful—could have been like a Tilda Swinton—but she was touched; something had obviously happened to her. She lived in the village, and she would call my mum and dad Auntie Chris and Uncle Tam. She was older than Tammy and me, and we were always scared and riveted by the way she looked and dressed.

I've always dug deep when I research. Thinking about all this, I came across the work of the Czech outsider artist Johann Hauser (1926-1996), and found a drawing of his, which was so uncannily like a yellow lace dress I designed in my Princess Margaret on Acid collection of Spring 2011 it freaked me out. Who was this guy? Hauser was thought to be "feeble-minded," and was sent to an institution at the age of 17, but then transferred to the Maria

Gugging Psychiatric Clinic in Austria (known as Gugging), where Dr. Leo Navratil encouraged him to draw—he could have been a designer! Dr. Navratil set up the Center for Art and Psychotherapy at Gugging in 1981, inviting artistically talented patients to live there. I read that there is [now] a house of artists, Gugging Gallery, run by Dr. Johann Feilacher, who took over from Dr. Navratil, who changed it into a community of artists, so I wanted to go.

Gugging is half an hour's drive from Vienna in a valley surrounded by green. It looks phenomenal. There are two buildings: a residence, where they sleep, with nurses and a canteen, and the old school, which has been converted into this massive, beautiful gallery, which is open to the public, where they showcase the work. Other artists can come and work alongside them—they're very inspiring. There are 11 men and one woman. Johann, the professor, took us around and introduced us to everyone. He is trained as a psychiatric doctor, but is also a sculptor, so he really understands the world of art and loves it as a facility for people to be creative. Johann will go out and meet people that he thinks have the ability to live there and support themselves, but not only



Artist Thao wearing an original mask. Photographed at the Maria Gugging Psychiatric Clinic just outside of Vienna in Klosterneuburg, Austria.



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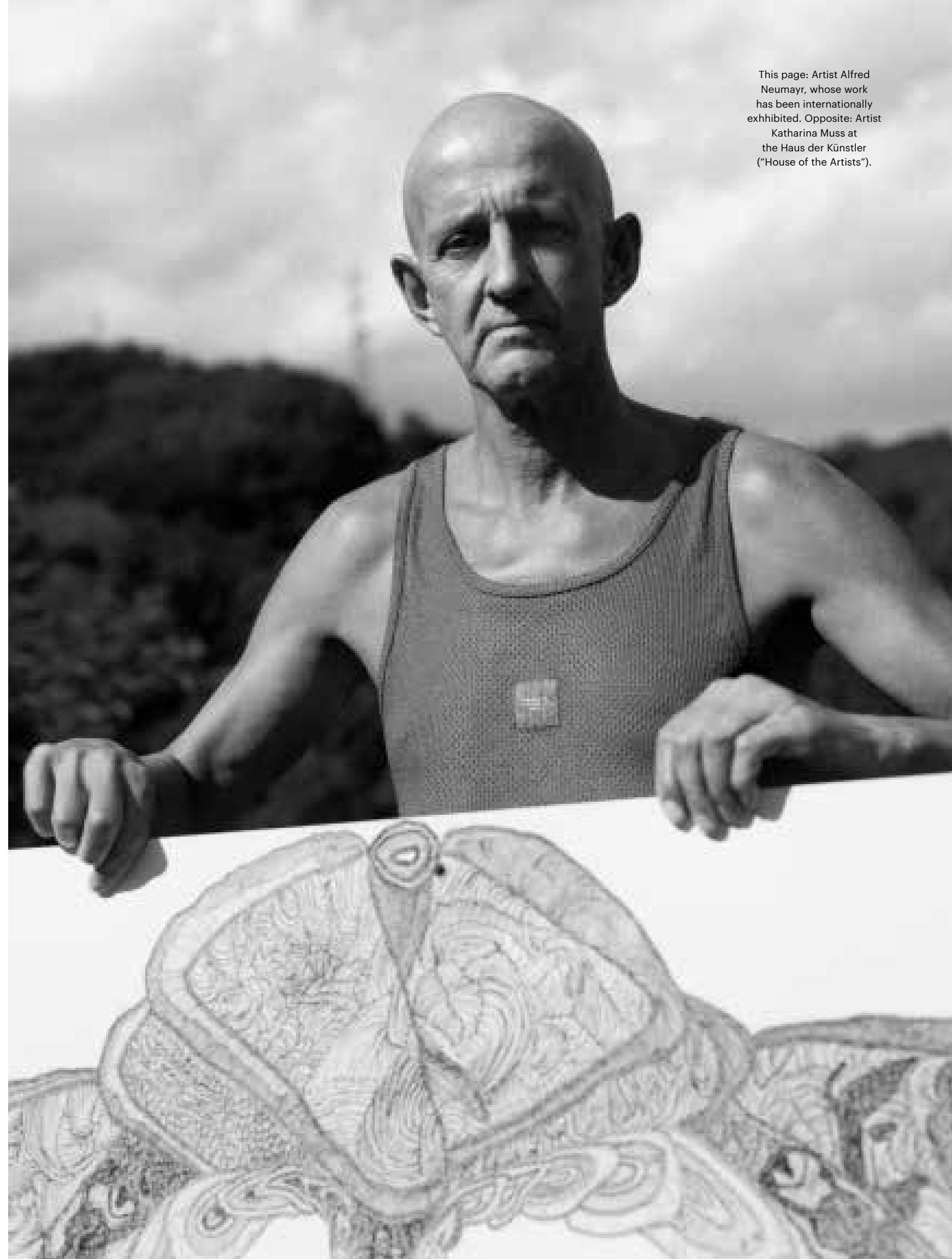
that—he sees that they are talented. He curates the exhibitions and does all the amazing graphics and billboards for the museum. He’s curated an exhibition dedicated to Hauser. I just walked around, and saw how this guy painted every day of his life with so much passion, rage, and happiness. You just think, “Yeah, I want this.” Whereas sometimes you walk around galleries and think, “What is this shit?” The word “trendy” applies to art now, and I think it’s so wrong. Art wasn’t like that when we were growing up; it was part of your life story. You’d never follow a trend, and it was great. And that is their world; they’re led by their art.

Gugging looks after people who have an interest in art. They may have high-functioning autism or Asperger’s. They sell their art to keep them going. I’d never been to anywhere like it before, but Tammy once taught art therapy for two years. It was when my dad died. I was 21, in my first year of my BA at Central Saint Martins. Obviously it was a huge and horrible shock. Tammy had been living with me, but went back home to Scotland to help Mum out. Sandra, who is our elder sister, was a nurse, and was working in nursing homes at that point. Tammy had seen something about art therapy, and was like, “Well, I could do that!” That’s how I got engaged in this world, through Tammy. The difference is where Tammy worked was a nursing home for the elderly; these were people who were scientists, teachers, mums and dads, who were forgotten about—I love them. The other day, I was in Scotland, seeing my auntie Mary, one of my mother’s sisters, who

has dementia. Being in that kind of facility can scare people, but it doesn’t [scare] me. They’re people who’ve been discarded in some way. I mean, what did they do before? It was great to see her. But Gugging is on a completely different level, because these people were born with their conditions. I thought, “I’m going to go in, and I don’t know what to expect.” You expect the worst, don’t you? There were humbling moments where I thought, “This is quite sad,” but then the richness they’ve got when they go to work in the studio is incredible. There was an artist whose 85th birthday party we were invited to, one of the oldest residents. His work is quite extraordinary. He’ll do a canvas the size of a wall, which is flower-flower-flowers. It was quite humbling to walk in. Everyone was sitting down, and they all really engaged with me, speaking to me in German.

There was one man, Karl Vondal, who followed me around, asking about Wembley Stadium, it was so touching. I’m sure he went through a lot growing up, but his outlet was his art. Alfred Neumayr was drawing jellyfish and anatomy. Arnold Schmidt was just saying hello every two minutes, and shaking your hand; he was so lovely. I’m going to buy some of his work. He’s now drawing flowers, so happy and so engaging. He was such a lovely person. The flowers really catch his personality—he’s like that, smiley. He’s been there for a long time, 30 years or so.

They’re very sensitive people. Really receptive to what other people feel, too, and really emotional. There were people

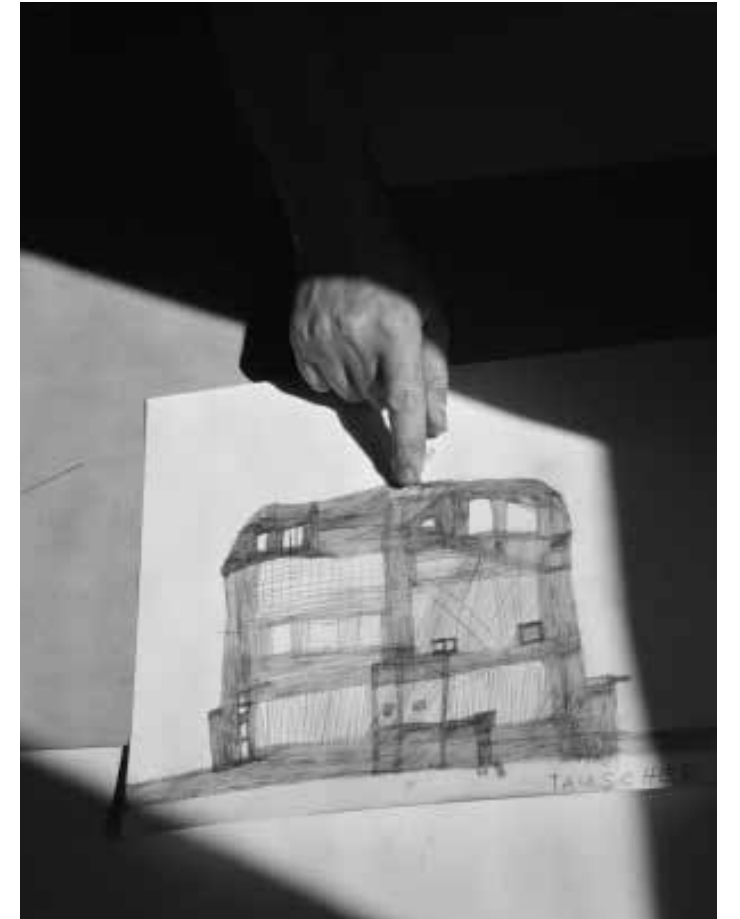


This page: Artist Alfred Neumayr, whose work has been internationally exhibited. Opposite: Artist Katharina Muss at the Haus der Künstler (“House of the Artists”).



This page: Artist Arnold Schmidt (“Andi”), holding his artwork. Schmidt, 57, has been living at the House of the Artists since he was a teenager. Opposite: Artist Jüergen Tauscher points at one of his artworks.

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obviously working through things from their childhood[s]. We’ve all got it in us, something dark that can come out as something beautiful, haven’t we? Their art has been sold in big galleries, and at the Sotheby’s and Christie’s of the world, they’re really quite world-famous, but it’s a fact that outsider art or art brut is still not properly recognized. Whereas these people are doing better things in some respects, I think, than what we’re seeing now. Their work has so much emotion and so much narrative and personality—you feel that there’s a life story they’re telling in their work.

Researching the history of art brut—the term coined by the French artist Jean Dubuffet—is pretty revealing. There were artists from the past, like Scottie Wilson (1888-1972), a Scottish artist, from Glasgow, who Dubuffet discovered and collected. Scottie was very primitive in his work, but he always refused to sell it at commercial art rates. Picasso and Paul Klee bought his work, and you look at it and think, “Hang on. Who did this first?” There was Henry Darger (1892-1973), who worked as a hospital custodian in Chicago, who did these amazing pictures of little girls and boys—but they’ve got guns and rifles, because he was obsessed with a young girl who was murdered that he couldn’t get out of his head. That was in the 40s and 50s—almost like Enid Blyton. There was Judith Scott (1943- 2005), who had Down syndrome. When she was separated from her twin sister when she was institutionalized, she constantly started to cocoon things,

wrapping them to protect them. Madge Gill (1882-1961), was a housewife who had so many miscarriages, she drew all these beautiful self-portraits and spirits that she saw, and used knitting, weaving, and crochet.

Johann says he hates what they do at Gugging to be called art therapy, and it’s not that. But I personally feel that when I draw, I do feel better about myself. It’s an outlet, like returning to being a like child again, to being normal, not thinking—just letting your hand dictate. When you’re drawing you just feel like, “I can achieve anything!” Just from that pen and piece of paper, I can come up with collection after collection. I’ve drawn all my collections; maybe not many designers do that. I draw, scale it up, and try it on. My life is consumed by that part of the process. I love to be isolated and just draw for a week. It’s that sort of thing, of being back at school where you had no influences, no idea what was fashion, what was art, and you just had that real naiveté. There were no rules; you just broke them. You made your own rules. It relates to how I work in the fashion world, too. Doing it for the love of it.

It’s hard to be creative all the time. To do it to order, that’s when you can’t produce the work because the demand—it affects you in your shoulders. Creativity is the sole purpose of me being in fashion. The sole purpose of my getting up in the morning. I don’t want to do anything derivative: If it reminds me of anything else,

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I scrap it. I don't want to be thought of as having a cut-and-paste mentality. I know historical context, I know everything going on in fashion. If you put it out there, and someone doesn't like it, that's all right, because things are meant to be different.

I was taught by the biggest outsider: Professor Louise Wilson OBE [MA fashion course director at Central Saint Martins until her death in 2014]. Obviously, Louise was pivotal to my career. This woman, who was seen to be a nightmare to work with, brought me out of my shell. She was loud, obnoxious, a cunt, a motherfucker—so many names Louise was called, and called herself—but to me, she was a gentle giant, so easy to talk to. The life lesson she taught me was that she was brutally honest, and actively went against the establishment. Louise said, “There is no such thing as good and bad taste. There's just different.” And this applies even to Gugging. I don't think there's just one way of doing things.

For me, it's my life coming out in my work. It bleeds into my work. Obviously, I want my business to grow, but there still

has to be integrity there, for me to look back and be proud in 10 years time. Not that, I just did that, or I was being lazy that day. Tammy and me are from Scotland, we're just normal people. We never want to conform. Everything's become that blandness stuff. I don't want that. I want people to go, “What the fuck is that?” It's good to be unsettled—to be taken out of your comfort zone—because it means you haven't seen it before. The company's changed so much in 10 years—10 years, it doesn't feel like it! Obviously when we joined with Kering, it was the best thing me and Tammy could have done, because we could grow and do our job. Because François-Henri Pinault really supports the creative vision, because why be like anyone else, why cannibalize? The world has changed. So this is really a great opportunity to be creative—to be radical again. That's why I got into fashion, because it was radical, and it's a fantasy, a mystery.

It was such an honour to meet everyone at Gugging. Everyone's just getting on with drawing or painting. Some will take weeks, months. They're inspiring, the way they are. ♦



This page left to right, top to bottom: Murals by Gugging artists cover the walls of the House of the Artists. Johann Feilacher, artist director and founder of the Museum Gugging. Opposite: Artist Jüergen Tauscher holding another artwork.