



EXHIBITING ART BRUT

CHRISTIAN BERST

Founded in 2005, Christian Berst gallery is the only one in Paris to specialize in Art Brut. Most of the work is contemporary, showing that this field no more limited to a period than it is to geographical or formal limits. Here, Berst tells Claire Margat about his views in the debate on how to exhibit Art Brut.

Showing Art Brut is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, it is often a matter of going beyond the intentions of the artists, who did not make their works with an audience in mind. André Rouillé spoke of "art without addressees."¹ This is a real paradox, even if the authors agree, explicitly or implicitly, and whether or not they are aware of the issues, and whatever their attitude to recognition. Also, this art has often been marginalized by art history, or is actually placed in contrast to the mainstream, as Jean Dubuffet did. Let us recall the title of what may be considered the first "manifesto" of Art Brut, the preface to the first exhibition at Galerie René Drouin, in 1949. The program was stated in the title: "Art Brut preferred to the cultural arts."

BETWEEN SEPARATION AND INTEGRATION

Dubuffet marked this break not only in his essentially figurative formal choices, but above all the way of exhibiting. The primitivist connection, the exaltation of the "common man," the often popular, anti-elitist, or even "modest" character of this work encouraged him—at the risk of tautology—to try to show Art Brut according to modalities which overplay the somewhat chaotic context in which these works were able to emerge. Thus, from the first hangings after the war of the Compagnie de l'Art Brut to current exhibitions at La Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, one observes the same density, sometimes the same formal non sequiturs evoking the old model of the cabinet of curiosities. Unfortunately this is often to the detriment of the works, for this treatment induces connotations which do not always do them justice. Indeed, what would people say if they did the same thing with "professional" artists?

Vue de l'exposition *The Museum of Everything*, Chalet society, Paris, 2012

Exhibition view

Coll. The Museum of Everything | Ph.

Nicolas Krief

I can understand that it would be tempting to get away from the white cube model and offer a sensorial experience, or even induce loss of bearings. It's a bit like the way the Museum of Everything tries to shatter curatorial norms. The thing is, you don't want it to become a new gimmick with no more real justification than the desire to do things "differently." And if you think of those collector's cabinets of yore, the novelty remains to be proven.

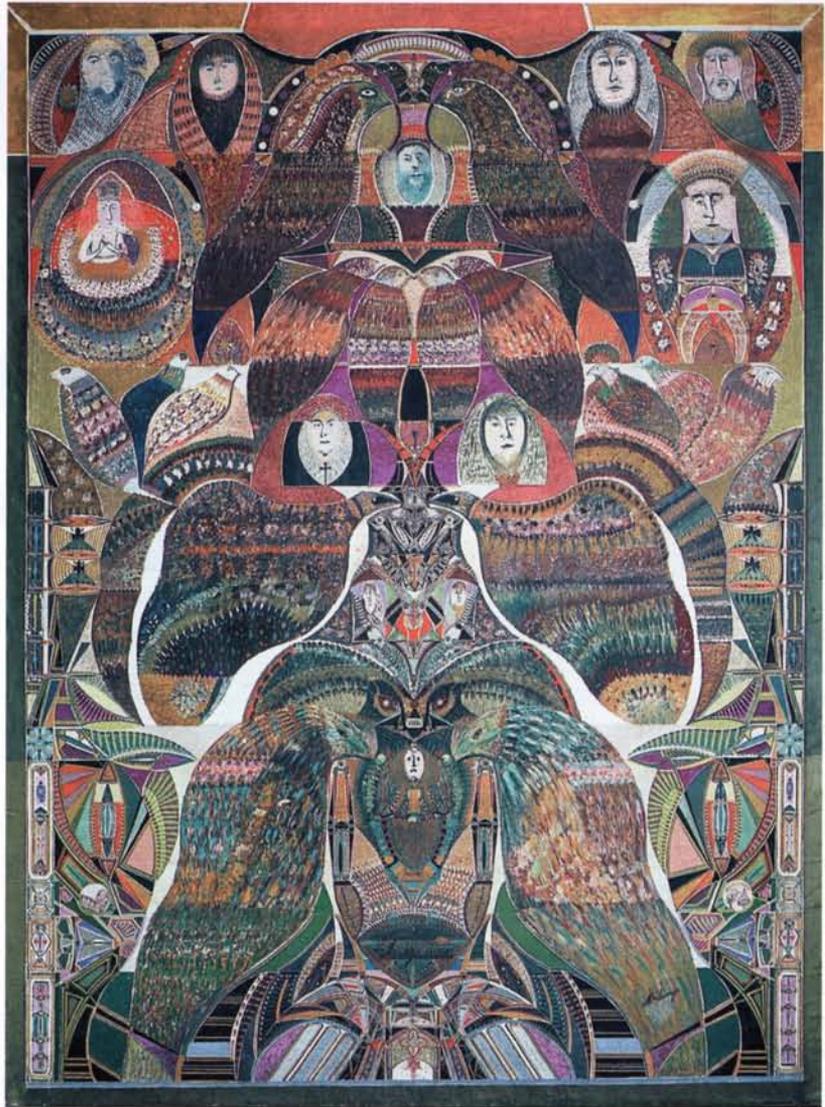
Still, there are noteworthy successes, when the subtle encounter between Art Brut and mainstream work amplifies the message and the emotion. For example, thanks to Antoine de Galbert, La Maison Rouge in Paris has put on two remarkable in this area, one featuring Arnulf Rainer and his collection of outsider art, the other Augustin Lesage and Elmar Trenkwalder and "les inspirés."² LaM put on *Habiter poétiquement le monde* in 2010.³

Among significant examples of Art Brut shown on its own, in the same way as contemporary art, we find Bruno Decharme's abcd collection⁴ and, more recently, exhibitions of work by Henry Darger⁵ and Judith Scott.⁶ As for La Halle Saint Pierre, in Montmartre, and the Art Brut collection at LaM, their presentation style is roughly half-way between the Dubuffet approach and current standards. The status of Art Brut has been raised whenever bold curators like Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin and Jan Hoet have set out to show it conditions similar to those of art by professionals.

When exhibiting Adolf Wölfli at Documenta in 1972, Szeemann set out to elide the pathological origin of his works and emphasize their place at the center of art history. A praiseworthy development, certainly, but debatable. It was as if, in his determination to erase frontiers and highlight what he called "individual mythologies," he found himself hiding the fact that these works are different by their very essence, in the sense that they were not conceived or produced to refer to the sacrosanct model of the artist-producer. This is a recurring temptation in the world of art.

We should not forget that the maker of Art Brut does not acknowledge either the market or legitimizing agents such as museums. She refers to a more individual, or even existential regime. The art world has not devoted much study to this difference of nature. Art Brut is usually absent from curricula, and therefore from art history. Moreover, such a study would go to the heart of artistic matters and require us to abandon certain certainties about art, which it is never easy to do.

Thus, to come back to ways of exhibiting Art Brut, what we have is, on one side, Dubuffet the "separatist" and, on the other, Szeemann "the integrationist." Such are the approaches that have dominated so far. I shall put the emphasis on a third way, a path that is narrower but also more balanced, one that does not overlook the essential alterity of these works, but that does not stigmatize or ghettoize them either. For what is Massimiliano Gioni saying when, without further explanation, he exhibits Anna Zemankova, Guo Fengyi and Arthur Bispo do Rosário among professional artists in his *Palazzo Enciclopedico* show at the 2013 Venice Biennale? He casts no light on the particularity of their production, nothing that would make us aware of their real scope and significance. On the contrary, he makes them banal, lessens their impact. Moreover, in bypassing contemporary Art Brut, he confirms the notion that Art Brut somehow belongs to the past. This reminds me of a conversation with Sandra Adam-Couralet who recently exhibited Judith Scott in keeping with the prevailing protocol of contemporary art, that is, without revealing the "otherness" of the works.



Augustin Lesage
Symboles des pyramides, vers
 1927-1928
 "Symbols of the Pyramids"
 190 x 140 cm
 Coll. part. | Ph. DR



Louis Soutter

L'innocent, le témoin, le saut,
1930-1940

"The Innocent, the Witness, the Leap"

Gouache sur papier, 44 x 58 cm

Gouache/paper

Coll. Arnulf Rainer | Ph. DR

Even if this curator attempted to show the primacy of the power of the object, she wanted to show Scott's sculptures as the equals of other more "conventional" works intended for an audience. According to her, the distinction was pointless, obsolete. Still, she did eventually admit that if we considered the work in its entirety, and thus revealed the strange drive of the person who made it, it was like going from two to three dimensions. It showed Scott in a new light, with an unprecedented depth and relief. As if she had realized that the work and its creator were, as Art Brut, a single entity.

Another problem concerns terminology: to show is also to designate. Now, outsider art—a notion which is becoming general—is something to be banished. In addition to this exclusion aspect, its definition includes forms that have nothing to do with Art Brut. Any autodidact is an "outsider." To put it simply, this Anglo-American concept is an impoverishment compared to the richness of meaning of Art Brut.

EXPLAINING ART BRUT

Given the almost unlimited formal spectrum of Art Brut, it is easier to attract a new audience by showing it works whose formal closeness to contemporary art is likely to inspire confidence. In fact, that is the way it has worked ever since the beginnings of our interest in these so-called marginal forms of art. Without the developments of modern art in the early twentieth century, would André Breton, Max Ernst, Paul Klee and the others even have been capable of "seeing" Art Brut? Probably not. In this sense, *Entartete Kunst*, that nauseating exhibition of "degenerate art" which the Nazis toured from town to town in 1937, juxtaposing works by the alienated from the Prinzhorn collection and works of modern art taken down from German museums was, in a paradoxical way, exemplary. Without meaning to, it highlighted the extraordinary genius of these artists, whether "normal" or "alienated" that it was trying to stigmatize. It brought out the vitalizing break that these works made with academic aesthetics. For the first time, museum productions were placed on the same level as those that were not meant to leave the confines of the asylum. It was, quite unwittingly, revolutionary.

The essential otherness of these creators raises another problem. This is of an ethical nature and concerns the revelation of private traits, psychic suffering, infirmities and social marginalization. Should exhibition labels say everything, or just a little, or nothing about all this? Should we limit ourselves to the cold, neutral "police tabs" recommended by Dubuffet? Should the artist's inner being be revealed to the voyeurism of the crowd? How does one handle works that can only be truly understood if we know their

Christian Berst is a gallerist, publisher, curator and writer. His gallery hosts seven exhibitions a year, mostly solo shows, and organizes discussions and film screenings. Berst is careful to bring in figures from outside the world of Art Brut in order to enrich the conversation. After the success of *Arte Bruta: terra incognita*, which he curated at the Vieira da Silva museum in Lisbon in 2012, he has been asked to organize the first major exhibition of Art Brut to be held in China, slated for 2015. His current Paris program includes a show of Art Brut worldwide (September 2013) and solo shows by Masao Obata (October–November) and James Edward Deeds (December–January 2014).

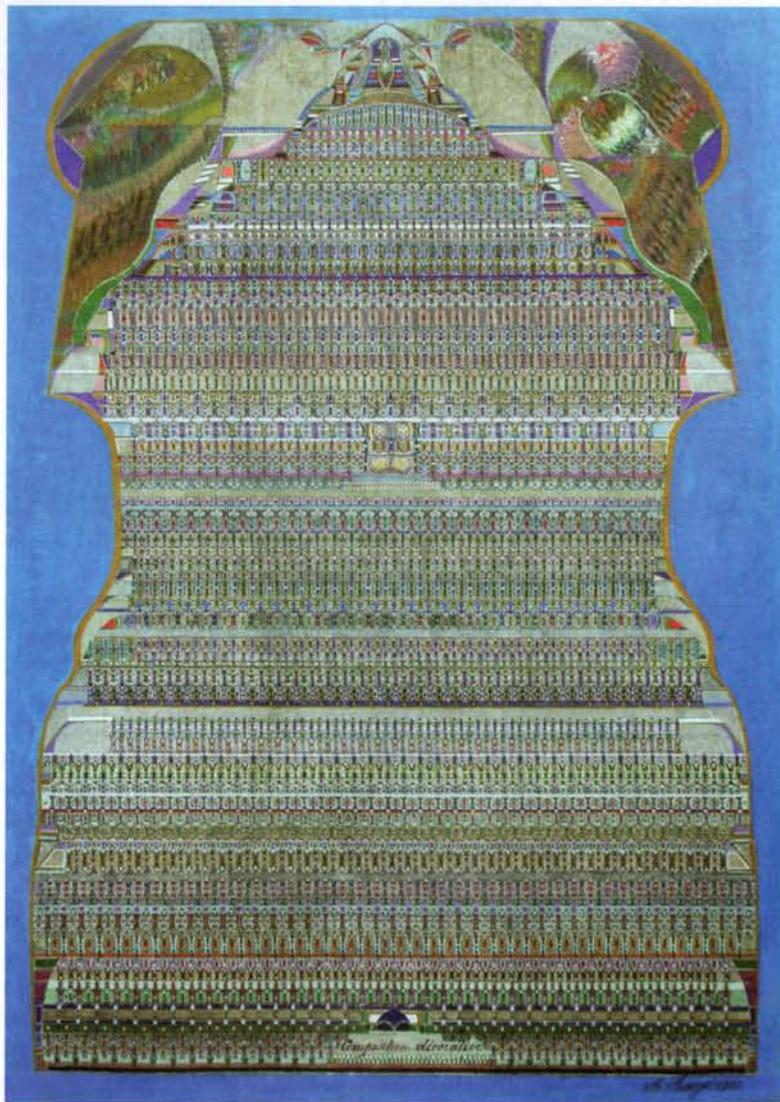
authors? This obliges us to reconsider our perception of alterity, to question the very notions of madness and marginality? Personally, I am inclined to break with this prudishness—“normopathy” I could almost say—which is incapable of venturing into the uncomfortable lands of supposed “abnormality” without euphemism. Of course, one must proceed with tact and restraint, respecting the wishes of the persons concerned, and sometimes their families, too. But why say nothing about a particularity that I perceive as a distinction or extension of life itself? Now, I am not praising suffering, but we mustn’t lapse into a black-and-white vision of things, tinged with hygienism. Anyway, how did people refer to these creators in the infancy of collections of psychopathological art and the Collection de l’Art Brut? People spoke of anonymous, numbered “cases,” they depersonalized them, their name was reduced to its first syllable. Were they respected as artists? Weren’t they dispossessed of their works, symbolically first of all? Were they not dispossessed of themselves, of what constituted their identity?

There are poets who have written their finest verse in a state that modern psychiatry might diagnose as psychotic. But do their biographers pass over these states that drove them to write? No, no more than it stigmatizes or insults someone suffering from melancholy to mention schizophrenia or Down’s syndrome. On the contrary, by recognizing them as “other” without taboos, and by presenting their productions within the cultural field, I put them at the center of things, as they are. I think that I respect them more than if I amputated what is their foundation as “authors,” as responsible for what I find beautiful. We cannot leave the idea of Art Brut in the hands of unscrupulous curators who are looking for a label to enhance the production of art-therapy workshops whose only merit is often only to help people in difficulty along the path of adjustment, if not to actually cure them. They respect neither Art Brut nor art, period. Worse, they fail to respect the patients they are responsible for by press-ganging them in an adventure that could easily diminish them. The public sees that, too, but the uncertainty is there.

What is fascinating about Art Brut is the way it is shown, because this zone is a kind of Bermuda Triangle where our compasses go haywire. Many of our concepts, we soon realize, no longer apply. It’s very stimulating. If our inventiveness and our desire to explore or understand are aroused it is the sign that we are not condemned to sterile certainties. Art Brut encourages us to be freer in our approach to art, society and culture, but it also gives us a great responsibility. But our primary responsibility is not to leave it as a blind spot in the history of art, which means showing it and experiencing it. That enriches our ideas, but also moves us, gives us the visual proof of what we really are, in our alterity.

Interview by Claire Margat

Translation, C. Penwarden



Augustin Lesage
Composition décorative, 1928
 “Decorative Composition”
 (datée / dated 1932)
 140 x 95,5 cm
 Coll. Antoine de Galbert
 Ph. la Maison rouge

¹ “Photographie et art brut,” round table, Gal. Christian Berst, June 26, 2012.

² *Arnulf Rainer et sa collection d’art brut*, June 23–October 9, 2005, *Augustin Lesage et Elmar Trenkwalder, les inspirés*, June 11–September 7, 2008.

³ *Habiter poétiquement le monde*, LaM, Villeneuve d’Ascq, September 25–January 30, 2011.

⁴ *À corps perdu. abcd, une collection d’art brut*, Pavillon des Arts, Paris, April 30–September 26, 2004.

⁵ *Henri Darger, bruit et fureur*, La Maison Rouge, June 8–September 24, 2006.

⁶ *Objets secrets. Judith Scott*, Collège des Bernardins, Paris, October 12–December 18, 2011.