

# The responsibility of the Art Brut gallery owner

## PREAMBLE:

Given the fact that the question of such a responsibility is rarely presented in these terms for a gallery owner who works with more conventional art, its very enunciation, as such, induces the idea that the art of obscure personalities from the margins of society cannot be managed "with impunity" or perhaps that a particular protocol or unusual skills or arrangements are required for the profession of an art merchant of this type. In short, that a certain specialization is required. It is as if the social or mental "otherness" that serves as the framework in which these works of art were produced requires us to reinvent the art gallery owner's profession, to grant him a moral responsibility largely beyond his primary tasks. In fact, beyond the role of distribution and at times, of legitimization, one perceives in the subtext a question of ethics for a merchant of art brut and a responsibility that is social as much as political. This is without including the responsibility that falls to him in terms of the necessary re-reading or revision of art history that this process requires.

However, and this is a crucial point, here it is the question of works that often are destined only for the eyes of those who produced them and, due to this fact, that have not been "imagined" for leaving the private sphere in which they were created. In other words, that their very commercialization is manifestly the first encounter of this paradox and thus the first of the transgressions conducted by the art brut gallery owner, even if his action is only the more structured end result of previous vague desires.

## AN ORIGINAL "SIN"?

Nonetheless, as I have already had the occasion to explain, it is interesting to come back to the historical conditions that form the basis of this market. One then perceives that one must acknowledge Dubuffet and all of the proselytes of this art of the fringes for having opened these works up to the recognition, study and, ipso facto, the covetousness of amateurs due to their willingness to earn recognition for their art from cultural elites.

Prinzhorn himself could be among those who originally set off such a process through his publications and in his role as an ardent collector and promoter. In addition, one must ask oneself if the Nazis did not also provide unwitting assistance to this initiative through their 1937 itinerant exhibition on "degenerate art" which, for the first time, placed these products on the same level as the most modern art that had been taken off of the picture rails of German museums. This parallel still has a lasting presence in the unconsciousness of our time.

Finally, as one must remember, it was the creators themselves who consented to giving up these works and, in certain situations, knowingly produced them for this purpose. In particular, one can think of the historical Wölfli and his bread art or Lesage and his method of calculating prices for his works based on the hourly salary of an underground miner such as himself.

Let us also not forget that right at its creation just after World War II, the Compagnie de l'Art Brut organized exhibits during which works could be acquired by the public. Later, this group would also help an already established merchant, Alphonse Chave, to organize the marketing of creations of which certain pieces were reserved for his own collection.

Therefore, one can see that the entirely theoretical posture against the so-called corrupting power of the market and its moral perversity, was already defeated by the most radical defenders of this "virgin" art that pretended to make efforts for it to remain as such, without speaking of the defiance towards cultural organizations, as much in terms of their functioning as their operating areas or domains of competency.

This mission insisting on the demolition of "authorities" and of their power of legitimization was also a constant in the thinking of Dubuffet. The first step of this undermining work was already in the title of his first manifesto: "Art Brut preferred to Cultural Art" in 1949. But this same Dubuffet perhaps underestimated the fact that museums, galleries and collectors, far from being corrupting agents, were also the walls that would preserve this creation from submersion and oblivion in the same way as the most radical zealots of art brut.

In addition, the ultimate renunciation of Dubuffet, that he never truly admitted to, was the creation of a museum, which, in contrast to appearances and to written statements, was already present in seed form in the very statutes of the Compagnie. What he considered as an indignity, museumification, then became inevitable, even if one last modesty—to not say outright a purely semantic vanity—made him prefer the term "collection" to that of "museum".

Thus, by sanctifying his classics, by distinguishing his creators in publications that would become authorities on the subject, by submitting them to in-depth studies that would forever deprive them of a protective anonymity, the Compagnie de l'Art Brut therefore laid the corner stone of an ad hoc market.

By thus holding these works away from the market, at least on the surface, this status quo encouraged the arrival of an occult, parallel market, a chaos from which collections were created, particularly of art of the alienated. No one rose up against the presuppositions of these works, which were not monetized, joining collections without the slightest compensation for their authors; the only reason being that the collectors had unilaterally decided that this production be distanced from the elementary rules of trade for lack of commerce.

This situation, with rare and notable exceptions, lasted until the arrival of the first gallery owners who, in the 1980s, worked on increasing the value of this art in the proper and figurative senses.

### **Art expelled from paradise?**

These origins, although not exempting the gallery owner from many responsibilities which go well beyond the question of commercialization alone, nonetheless allow one to understand that as with all artistic production, art brut is subject to the same regime of desirability and thus to its excesses.

The merchant did not long remain the only actor in the commercialization of art brut, since the creation of art therapy workshops at the end of the 1970s led the institutions that conducted these to organize the circulation of works between authors and collectors. With the difference being that these structures were led to do this work with the aim of implicating all of the patients they had under their charge. Thus, above all they inscribed this work in the framework of their curative mission, often relegating aesthetic and hierarchical considerations to the background, which are usually considered to be pertinent. In this case, it was the market alone that sanctioned the work.

The first responsibility of the merchant, which is to organize and to contribute to the dissemination of this art, has nonetheless considerably increased for several reasons. First, because the operation that he must conduct is similar to a real rite of passage, to a kind of socialization that leads these products from an original anonymity to the rank of a real work of art; from an original naivety to social maturity in a manner of speaking. These obligations also increased due to one essential component inherent to this art: the works shown were not conceived for the market and not destined for it except after the fact, without the explicit acceptance of the creators at times. Due to this fact, beyond having to fight this paradox, there was the danger of altering it, or even betraying its very essence.

One can also add the fact that the authors of these works are reputed to be vulnerable and that, in many cases, their conscience of the finalities of the placement on the market of their efforts, when they are not totally indifferent to this, is in many ways beyond them. This requires the merchant, more than others, to act with tact and discretion since the human questions on hand clearly go beyond the financial and artistic issues. Thus, the gallery owner must be able to evaluate at what moment he could find himself obliged to act against their will. Or, acting with their agreement, explicit or not, he must anticipate the consequences of bringing attention to their works and the possible breakdown in the precarious equilibrium in which they live. Even if, in the case of artists protected by an institution, this phase must be developed with the staff working with them in their best interests and within an appropriate legal framework.

The "specialization" of the gallery owner must also establish a *modus operandi* that is differentiated according to the typology of creators that belong to this field. Thus the least "protected" of these authors of art brut are paradoxically the least ostracized by society; those who generally do not suffer from social otherness but who are in the end the most exposed in the negotiations and the appreciation of their work because they do not have the protective framework of an institution.

Indeed, those that Dubuffet qualified as "commonplace men", marginal autodidacts, are often the most likely to seize these opportunities to escape from their isolation, while not mastering the long-term stakes.

One can also add that their work, if it is suddenly acclaimed by the public, leads them to break with the original spontaneity of their creations, leading them to answer a request, even one that has not been formulated. It is therefore logical among this category of art brut authors, without being able to blame them, that numerous changes of status arrive, going from the status of creator that had only his work as an unsurpassable horizon to a deliberate artist in the market mechanism.

In this case, the gallery owner indeed has the responsibility to have encouraged the birth of an artist in the sense that society generally means, but at the same time to have betrayed his original mission to promote art that resists this digestion by legitimizing institutions.

But regardless of the creators concerned, it is henceforth established, with some hindsight, that in the immense majority of cases, this sudden attention redounds to their benefit, whether it be therapeutic or material. Due to this fact, the acclamation of their works by the community places them resolutely back at the centre of the game: they become fully-fledged actors as of the moment that they are considered fully-fledged authors. This leads to the cancellation, at least partial, of their exclusion by their re-enrolment in the social and cultural domain, without nonetheless eroding the otherness to which these creators and their products refer.

It is precisely here that another responsibility of the art brut gallery owner is found. Indeed, in contrast to all the other artistic categories of art history, which are studied, commented, taught, conserved and shown, art brut does not yet have intermediaries or authorities in museums or university institutions. The recent appropriation by established international structures, the latest being the Venice Biennale, is therefore not the fruit of a real maturation and it leads the art milieu to avoid the most problematic part of this art, its difference in nature compared to what one could call "cultural" production even if the language used appears to be the same.

Clearly, once this distinction is in place, the probable consequence risks to lead to an invalidation of the conventional tools for "thinking" art, or to have to admit that a parallel art history exists.

The specialized merchant, as the communication channel in this dynamic of dissemination, has the responsibility to make up for the momentary carelessness of the system, not by stigmatizing or ghettoizing through an abusive differentiation, but by opening the field of reflection by a resolute and opinionated defense of the specificity of art brut.

### **Terminological responsibility**

In addition, a remark is worth noting on the title of this art and on what I consider the highly desirable avoidance of the term "Outsider art" to which we prefer that of "art brut", for reasons of linguistic patriotism.

Indeed, the first of the responsibilities that comes to whoever takes responsibility for these artistic productions that are born, for the most part, outside of the field of art that is said to be "cultural" (to use the Dubuffet term) would be purely terminological. Which is to say, would touch upon the very essence of the thing being named. Indeed, the notion of an "outsider" leads one to the idea of exclusion and or margin. But not the margin claimed by the creators about which we are speaking, but in this particular case, that to which our normative society has assigned them.

As one can agree that our subject of study here is art, one can implicitly admit that "cultural" art would be at the centre of gravity of the art world and, consequently, outsider art will be at its margins. Therefore, that is to induce the idea that the subject that is occupying us is already limited and, in this particular case, that it is not at the heart of the problems of art, but that it would be a sort of corollary. In short, that it does not have the capacity of affecting our way of rethinking art in depth, but simply in a marginal way.

The notion of art brut offers the immense advantage of giving this art its original matrix, even if it does not benefit from a driver of the dominant language and was created by a personality as controversial and brilliant as Dubuffet. An art, as raw as gold, as diamonds, these precious materials in the state of nature, uncut, not reduced to a given function by an action of man and not reduced to serve - art that does not remain in the suburbs of art but art with the potential of re-enchanting the world.