

# conversation between bruno decharme & christian berst

## septembre 2014

CB: To begin, has Art Brut changed your life? If so, how?

BD: Art Brut has changed my life in the sense that it has become a leitmotif. It's around this axis that my life organized itself with the creation of the collection.

CB: But there was probably a turning point. You were surely elsewhere beforehand? What was going on for you at the time of your prehistory?

BD: I studied philosophy at college and I was lucky enough to have Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Dominique Lecourt, etc. as professors. Surprisingly, the questions that were being posed at the time about the deconstruction of thought and society dealt little with art. In 1975, I discovered the texts of Michel Thévoz, who was teaching in Lausanne and was the curator of the Art Brut Collection. I found in his work on Art Brut answers to the questions that interested me. In those years, I was also beginning to work in cinema and my real vocation was more oriented towards art than towards philosophical theorizing. In Art Brut especially, I found a kind of incarnation of the questions that have always nurtured my life, not to mention that haunt it. Metaphysical, ontological questions. Art, the art that touches me, carries these questions within it. I recently produced a film about Sufism, which explains that we reach transcendence through poetry and music. For Sufism, art is an incarnation of metaphysical questions, which is what Bergson was also exploring.

CB: Spirituality is never very far with Art Brut? Shamanism, trances, states of modified conscience... Between this moment of revelation and today, how has your perception of the concept evolved? For there were certainly works, but there was Dubuffet who was already well established, and you couldn't dissociate the two. How do you evaluate the path you yourself have taken?

BD: At first you lean on the father, the reference... And what a father! Dubuffet had an exceptional eye. But I was an undisciplined child, unlike for example Madeleine Lommel, the founder of l'Aracine who, as Deborah Couette reminds us in an article published in a journal of the École du Louvre, sought the approval of Dubuffet and Thévoz each time she wanted to acquire a work. Of a curious nature, I will happily listen to the ideas and comments of others, but in the end only my judgment makes the rules, and very quickly, I built my collection according to my sense of things. I must admit that for a time, I searched for creations known as «singular,» «out of the norm,» etc. I have to say that the artists in this field of art were very generous and didn't hesitate to give me their works. I soon began to politely refuse these gifts that had nothing to do with my real topic of exploration. Throughout the course of these years of collection, which began with my initial purchase in 1978 of a small drawing by Adolf Wölfli, I always felt close to Lausanne, to the people who brought this formidable adventure to life; this collection is essentially my family, even if I am a son that lives far away from it.

CB: Beyond your taste, which over time made you gravitate towards certain works rather than towards others, still in reference to Lausanne, what in your opinion are the aspects of the concept that you adopted and that evolved in your approach? What has been modified?

BD: This concept is very complicated to narrow in on. In the field of Art Brut my interest is essentially turned towards the works of the «mentally ill,» of the «crazy,» as they used to say, of psychotic people, according to the terminology of psychoanalysis and psychiatry. The way in which they see the world is fascinating and the mystical dimension that often nourishes their work is surely tied to what I was evoking before. Their mental constructions offer extravagant journeys that I can't find anywhere else. Art Brut is an extraordinary mental stimuli for those who like the unknown, who like to let themselves get caught up in the delights of getting lost and abandoning oneself to something.

CB: What strikes me is the manner in which you see your gaze to have evolved and focused on the works that were the most expressive and echoed who you were the most. I'll also point out that the question was in your relationship to the concept and not in your relationship to the people, even if it's complementary. In the same way that there was a change in Dubuffet between 1945 and 1967.

BD: Evolution is important; it is tied to art history and to its changes since the post-war period. With abcd, the association I founded 15 years ago, we try to add our two cents to the reflection on Art Brut, to put its principles back in perspective. For example, the question of culture: contrary to what people overly-superficially say about it, these artists are not beings who have come from other planets, strangers to our world - they are inscribed in the heart of our culture, even if socially they are marginalized. They have access to knowledge, to other perspectives that are for us rich in teachings. It is a discourse that Dubuffet didn't engage in and I'm convinced that it is, in particular,

around this question of knowledge that we must orient our investigations, bringing into our research all those who use the back roads of art and of knowledge in general.

CB: Is it not this very question of cultural exemption that was first used as the criterion dictated by a certain dogma, by the desire to oppose things, to oppose that world to the world of culture in a dichotomy?

BD: It was probably a political question for him. All of these questions are inscribed in a historical period: for Dubuffet there was, he thought, a need to effectuate a radical rupture, a rupture with a type of art thought of as learned. Over time and through research, it has become apparent that this question of culture is worth rethinking.

CB: And so in the end, each is very anchored within his culture, each in his cultural breeding-ground, and at the same time, what is fascinating, is that what distinguishes them from other artists is their individual mythology.

BD: I'm not comfortable with the expression «individual mythology,» which associates contradictory words. Mythology refers to a codified fable, an imaginary story that structures a civilization. As a religion, it is a cement, it is what we all share, that which we believe in common. On the other hand, the works of Art Brut offer us scenarios that really are individual to each author and it is for that reason that they interest us; they stage episodes of the psychological history common to each person. It's true that they often have in common the idea of having to carry the world on their shoulders. Saving it is recurrent, but each one tells it in his or her own way.

CB: What are the works that at first glance seem the most problematic to you in terms of the heart of the definition?

BD: Sonnenstern springs to mind. Surely because contrary to other works of Art Brut, the symbolic dimension jumps out. Besides, it is rather interesting to note that people who discover Art Brut and who perhaps have not yet tasted its many flavors cling easily to Sonnenstern. The dreamlike dimension probably spontaneously reminds them of surrealism and art inspired by dreams.

CB: A work like the one by Ratier?

BD: Only in appearance. His creative process is very interesting and I undoubtedly associate it with Art Brut. From the handicap of blindness that came with age, he found a way to work. He worked using what he was left with, the memory of his life: highly poetic objects. He enacted a radical transposition. One can imagine that if he hadn't become blind he would have created a more popular and conventional body of work. But of course this is only a hypothesis.

CB: What you seem to distinguish is the phenomenon of transgression or of transposition at a specific moment?

BD: Yes, it's a question of point of view, a matter of sides. Take the example of Miroslav Tichy, the only one capable of photographing women in that way. He takes the hideous position of the voyeur and yet he shows us women, all women, with love. They are all beautiful. The exact opposite of, for example, Helmut Newton, to cite but him, but we could say the same thing about most fashion photography.

CB: The notion of the superman was known and he created the notion of the 'superwoman.' There is a furtiveness that is translated in that image. It has its portion of fetishism. Then there are problematic works. In their essence, because they are anonymous. Certain ones have the embryo of a story that allows us to associate them with our concerns, and others are entirely orphaned; we identify those immediately with the perspective we end up developing. The rumors that were circulating at the time of Dubuffet regarding the origin of the Barbus (Bearded) Müller [statues] for example, what do you think of that?

BD: They are not among the ones I like the most, but I like the lack of knowledge about their provenance. I would however sell my soul for the Swiss Anton Muller!

CB: These works, don't you have the impression that, in a certain sense, they are interesting because of the fact that they are problematic and that they allow us to better grasp what is at the heart of our concerns?

BD: Indeed, it makes us wonder, it forces us to reflect. Sonnenstern, to come back to him, helps us to identify boundaries. We better understand the difference with, for example, Wölfli's work, how his work used one grammar, a language that was his own, invented.

CB: What do we say then about this playlet put together by Pierre Avezard, known as Petit Pierre? It's very touching, this signpost that he would put at the edge of a field to indicate the way to his carousel. We are at the fringes of popular art, no?

BD: This carousel is Art Brut at its purest. It goes beyond the naïve, the popular. Perhaps because of this chaotic, fragile machinery made haphazardly but that at the same time puts a world into motion. Perhaps also because Petit

Pierre saved them from rejection and put them back in working order to make us dream.

CB: There is also something other than the carousel, that isn't often discussed and that is found in Art Brut, and that's humor.

BD: Indeed, there are always discrepancies, nose-thumbing.

CB: There is a greater frivolity. It's not something that we find often since creating a mythology is a serious matter. Everything remains nevertheless very calibrated. He's a man who began by cutting sheet metal from a plane that had crashed nearby. He made his motors with the motors of washing machines or of mopeds. His brother became an engineer. He was in admiration before the machinery and the drive belts. He had understood everything though he was a cowherd boy and no one had ever taught him anything of the sort. There is a supplementary poetry. There isn't the same weight in a work when you know that the person only has that as a means of existing. I'm not talking about living, I'm talking about existing. Existing as oneself, projecting oneself, projecting one's imagination. Another question: Who were your favorite artists in your collection previously, and who are they today?

BD: Easy response but profoundly sincere: Wölfli, an unreachable horizon. Next is «Sophie's choice.» Martin Ramirez is deeply moving. I remember the first time I saw a work by Martin Ramirez in the United States in 1985; it was a shock.

CB: But when you were starting out as a collector, your choices were maybe oriented towards things that today you'd lean towards less?

BD: I'm under the impression that I've always liked the same works since the beginning. My taste hasn't changed so much, except that my choices have matured, have become more precise.

CB: It took me a long time to formulate in a few words what it was about this art that attracted me. Today, the best summary I have found is «the metaphysics of art.»

BD: I think I understand your definition, but I don't share this wording. It seems to me that rather, we'd have to speak of art as metaphysics, as I was saying before, art to reach the unsayable. But if we look closer, it is not specific to Art Brut except perhaps that the radicalness of Art Brut takes us far, to the limits, and makes us touch upon the question of nothingness and of Being.

CB: I'll note nevertheless, and now it's not within the realm of reason, it's just empirical, that when I discovered Art Brut, I didn't have the tools. This thing that I am now able to formulate appeared to me as obvious. Whereas with art in general, there was a cathartic phenomenon, because it's marvelous, it's an invitation to rise up, but I didn't perceive this relationship between the questioning and our mystery as a foregone conclusion. It's the Holy Spirit.

BD: We could put it that way. It is one of the great difficulties when we speak of Art Brut; these artists that take us places so far off, offer us mental adventures so extreme that we tend to project intentions there that they don't have.

CB: Let's speak about something more general. There is a phenomenon that accompanies the discovery of new works all over the world, an internationalization of Art Brut. In your opinion, what does this bring that is new to the perception of the concept, in the cultural, civilizational confrontation? How does that nourish us, does it rattle us?

BD: Art Brut is everywhere, it has always existed and it will always exist. To respond to your question on the distinctions we could identify according to the origin of works, it is striking to note that it is often very difficult to place a geographic identity except of course when a sign, a trace of writing for example, is inscribed there. Which means that these works are vehicles for archetypal forms, maybe modes of representation that are inscribed within us. This question deserves to be explored. It is nevertheless fantastic to be able to say that a woman that lives in the far reaches of China can tell us something that touches us just as intimately.

CB: The essential difference in our own approach to this field of creation with the one that Anglo-Saxons have is that ours is more dialectical, more conceptual. They have a more pragmatic approach.

BD: The Anglo-Saxons are interested in autodidacts.

CB: It's a smoke screen. As a result of speaking about autodidacticism, we forget what's essential. We see clearly that in these artists, whether they are learned or not, there is something else at work. The Anglo-Saxon mode of thinking is in the process of imposing itself at all levels, notably economic. And thus in the modes of representation, in human creations, in the way our imagination works. But since this idea of Outsider Art is spreading to other countries, how do you think all of that will evolve?

What will remain of this foundation according to which we have been thinking about these works?

BD: It's much easier to develop this idea of the Outsider since you don't have to think: the autodidacts are indexed and the matter is settled. Thinking about Art Brut calls into play all the complexities of «the human soul.» For all that, the perspective of the collector remains the essential criterion for speaking about Art Brut; this domain is rich and creative because its founding father had a remarkable eye. Later, the contribution of Michel Thévoz, Dubuffet's successor, was essential. He established the foundation, theorized the concept by leaning on the knowledge afforded to us by the fields of philosophy, history, geography, linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, etc. Regarding the future, there is no doubt that there will be two opposed camps; the Art Brut one will have to draw on stores of energy in order to make itself heard in the face of a dominant intellectual laziness. But I remain optimistic; time also works in the right sense, with the quality of the works doing the sorting. That is why I try to bring a lot of rigor into my collection.

CB: At the same time, it's a dangerous position because if the quality of the eye does everything, what prevents the works of brilliant, semi-professional autodidacts from entering into this sphere? Now we clearly see that all of that doesn't exactly operate on the same level. It is for that reason that the two approaches, sensible and conceptual, are essential.

BD: It is for that reason that, alongside the collection, I created abcd (Art Brut Connaissance [Knowledge] & Diffusion), a critical apparatus, a sort of laboratory that invites all those who take back roads to think about art. This work materializes via exhibits, publications, a seminar with the International College of Philosophy, led by Barbara Safarova, and cinematographic productions.

CB: I think that will work for all who have managed to get rid of a certain number of prejudices.

BD: It is necessary to also be very open in uniting people that can enrich our reflection and work on the purity of the concept.

CB: I'd like to come back to the question of the eye, since we observe clear differences between Dubuffet's collection and yours, or what you have chosen to show here, in my gallery: you are not in the only primate of figuration. Sign for the fact that the gaze, and thus the concept, has evolved over time, starting at the moment when there are no longer formal limits to Art Brut. Dubuffet had a harder time with more abstract works.

BD: Who do you have in mind?

CB: Harald Stoffers. I don't think he is in Lausanne, or Beverly Baker either. That gives the impression that the world of - let's say «traditionalist» - Art Brut sees a danger in taking a step towards the world of culture in considering certain forms that you can also find in contemporary art. We clearly see that now, there is a confinement to dogma.

BD: It's interesting, what you say, because for me it's so obvious that it's at the heart of the subject. I don't really notice that there are dogmatic people that might not be able to accept it. But why would dogma refuse these artists?

CB: There is a clergy. I would have been curious to see Dubuffet's reaction to the discovery of this type of creation. The effort of figuration, of estheticism according to conventional canons, that made people more attentive to this type of output while simple graphomania wasn't paid much attention to. We were speaking earlier of the crossed out drawings of Doctor Mabuse; it's very interesting. Who knows, maybe Fritz Lang met Prinzhorn.

BD: Our eye has evolved gradually over time. We have refined our gaze. It is also important to note that the presence of the culture of popular art is very present in the first collections of Dubuffet.

CB: That clearly also appears very quickly in the typology of artists. Once put to the side, the psychopathological art of the beginning of the 20th century, commonly called «art of the insane,» for others, there is nevertheless a somewhat neocolonial or Rousseauian quest, with this idea of the natural man, the natural artist, who would be like the wild child. It's primitivism along with the colonial expositions in Paris.

CB: What assessment do you give to this third of a century obsessed with and inhabited by Art Brut?

BD: You are just as well-placed as I am to see its evolution. You are perhaps even more at the center of the history of collectors than I am since you frequent them while I only know a few. That allows you to see how their perspective evolves. It seems to me that there is a great weariness concerning a lot of artistic output for which it is necessary to have an instructions manual of four pages to only see, in the end, a banal object with no more value than a faucet. Well, I do know that the banality of an object can incite a critical approach to the world and to art. But with persistent discourse, disincarnation becomes omnipresent and there is no longer a connection with what touches us. Without a doubt, Art Brut brings us back to the essential questions. I also think it echoes a general anxiety, the questions about identity that have exploded. We find in Art Brut people who reconstruct what was destroyed. A

formidable life lesson.

CB: Even if I know it's necessary to be prudent when we use this term, don't you think that we also have the right to evoke the term «humanism,» even if I know it's a red flag for many people?

BD: As someone older than you, I've experienced the trajectory of society over the last 40 years. When young, I was, as was appropriate for the time, involved in the «ultra» movements, denigrating consumerism, with humanist philosophers seen as renegades. In light of the disasters that we know about today, we're coming back to placing Man at the center of the world. Art Brut shows us Man in his most radical individuality.

CB: We must also admit that we have the comfort of distance, perspective, with respect to the Dubuffetian context; that allows us to be more nuanced than him. To be capable of seeing that it isn't because something is produced in the domain of culture that it is necessarily detestable. That is where an interesting dialogue is possible.

BD: For him it wasn't possible. There was a dichotomy, one had to choose between «this» or «that.» Today we seek the common denominator that nourishes all art, the profound humanity, and Art Brut is an indicator of that. As a result, that helps us to read the rest and allows us to share and to get interested in creations that have nothing to do with Art Brut, but that share this aspect of «authenticity.»

CB: That goes back to this reflection by Antoine de Galbert which I found very just: Art Brut allows us to put the totality of the field of art and its output in a new light, and thus what was called the «art of the insane» at the beginning of the 20th century participated in the advent of modern art.

BD: And to the contrary, over the course of the 20th century, revolutionary figures in art and thought, such as Duchamp, Breton, Szeemann, allowed us to widen our perspective on the works of Art Brut that Dubuffet didn't seem to appreciate, remaining in effect very attached to figurative forms.

CB: Excessively. It's rather suspicious, even, for that says something about this dogmatic side that Dubuffet never managed to get rid of. In wishing to oppose, it was necessary that the demonstration be more obvious, as demonstrative as possible. Still today, Art Brut, which maintains a formal kinship with contemporary art, functions as a foil for certain specialists.

BD: Zdenek Košek or Pepe Gaitán are perfect examples of this. Numerous public Art Brut collections and actors in this field seem to skip over these forms. Here still we must dust and air out the field, not to tone it down, but to show that there are other ways, other grammars, other fascinating forms.

CB: We really are at a watershed moment. Nevertheless, no one today would say that the Duchampian revolution from a century ago, however prodigious it might have been, remains an insuperable horizon. Since then, ethnographic art has been taken into account. And now, with Art Brut, we attain intimate new horizons at the heart of our culture; there is no exoticism. We have to forge new tools?

BD: We indeed have to forge new tools and propose a new way of talking about Art Brut, bring it back within a field of more universal study. Art Brut is not foreign but very anchored, in a particular mode, at the heart of our culture. It is the purpose of the exhibit at La Maison Rouge, which offers a journey through themes common to any other form of art, and here the point is to see how they operate in the Art Brut sphere.

CB: Language, but also customs, purposes of art. On the one hand, us two, we apprehend art as the invitation to an adventure of the mind and it is difficult to reconcile that with the reality of the market, which likes simple ideas. And so we have many lessons to learn from the Anglo-Saxons for they understand it and apply this model marvelously well. But that is largely incompatible with the complexity that we are trying to introduce since we know it is necessary. And it is very much because it is not simple that it is worthwhile to «go try it,» as Dubuffet used to say.

CB: Salvation will come, in the world of art as a whole, from the ability to apprehend the issues that Art Brut confronts us with, and this will surely happen mainly through institutions rather than through the market, for they practice reflection, research, exploration of the limits. They have a critical apparatus at their disposal. Now, obviously, we propose it with a new lexicon, with new problems, but the model of institutions-critics-art historians-curators-conservators will allow us to assist in thinking about it. The market, on the other hand, will have a hard time with this complexity.

BD: But it will follow because there will be references that will be proposed by the institutions, quality exhibits, etc. We must also trust the new generation: not a week goes by without a PhD candidate coming to see us because he has chosen Art Brut as his or her topic. In fifteen years, we will maybe find them in a museum. It's great, what is happening. I think the institutions will benefit from this new generation that is going to change the stakes.

CB: It is the same for professionals as it is for the public. We realize that from the moment they discover Art

Brut, unless they are completely dogmatic or have a total absence of curiosity, how could they not delve into this adventure.

BD: All of that is going in the right direction. But that also means we must be very rigorous. Especially in collections.  
CB: We also tell ourselves, like anyone who has had a revelation, that we don't want to keep it for ourselves, but share it. For it is in sharing that we meet people who will also make us progress. Not only in the sense that they will affirm but also in the manner in which they will ask certain questions.

BD: And the way they will look at what we propose.

CB: We grow from exchanges. What is productive is to initiate the dialogue, with the art world, the way you do it in the texts of your publications, with anthropologists, ethnopsychiatrists, etc. Now, will you talk to us about the big projects that you'd like to realize or the ideas you're entertaining?

BD: There are forthcoming projects. To try to share my thoughts with others in the context of exhibitions, publications and other possible mediums. For me there is also the question of the future of the collection. The dream would be to find a partner who would fall in love with it, and who would offer a place to keep it. Another idea would be to share my collection with other passionate collectors, in fields other than art, and to create an atypical place, open, that blends different perspectives on the world, an encyclopedic vision of sorts, a palace of knowledge.

CB: Earlier you were speaking of a period that needs to reinvent itself and I think that the time has never been so right - at the same time that a combat has started against brutality, obscurantism, the return to regressive forms of society - to bring together other energies in order to try to relocate meaning, to return to humanism. I wouldn't be surprised if there were «honest people,» as we used to say back in those days, who want to participate in this type of project because it isn't elitist.

CB: You could also make a donation to a museum if it goes beyond its role of conservation? For those who are somewhat perplexed by the considerable world that opens up to them when they discover your collection of Art Brut, what suggestions would you give them?

BD: To be totally honest, I am completely intoxicated by my collection. It's no longer even reasonable. And I have met few people in the same position.

CB: Beyond that, I am very badly placed to speak of collectors. Most are people who, interested in other forms of art, have often discovered Art Brut late in the game. And for having crossed the Rubicon myself, by going into the field of contemporary art, I discovered that these types of collectors interested in Art Brut are not the typical collectors. I therefore have a hard time speaking about them. I've only had the occasion to meet wonderful people.

BD: The principal difficulty is the lack of knowledge. The perplexity is often great, even with a lot of curiosity, even with a great amount of openness in the approach. It is dizzying, even for us. But it is learned and implies going beyond one's own taboos, letting oneself go. Once you have your codes, you know how you work. When you showed me Pepe Gaitán, it immediately clicked. But for someone who doesn't know, that can be complicated. It is in this sense that you have the interesting job of helping people discover that world.

CB: When you get right down to it, I have the impression that it is a sort of series of transgressions. Art Brut is already transgressive in nature, it is transgressive to be interested in it and to collect it without regard for the common tendencies, until now, of the marketplace. This succession of transgressions nevertheless necessitates people, I think, who have as one of their principal qualifications, as it occurs to me, being «free.»

BD: That isn't easy. Collectors all have a blueprint, even when they come from a field that isn't this one. So I imagine that they are «cheeky» people, if you will, because the popularity ratings are not the same, nor are the references. So indeed, knowing that, we can operate better with works like those of Darger, but when you are in the realm of unknown names, we must have the ability to seize this freedom.

CB: When we speak of the «psychopathology of the collector,» it is probably in the field of Art Brut that the expression is most true.

BD: We must be able to let go for the encounter to be beautiful.