

INTRODUCTION

by Christian Berst

Brut Now: Art Brut in the Technological Era.

In the history of ideas, any intellectual or artistic enterprise finds itself confronted with two ferocious adversaries: dogmatism and ignorance. The one feeding on the other, when they are not kindled by laziness. And so it goes when, wanting to break from a linear and orthodox – even canonical – vision of art history, we try to study a field whose fertility had not been measured by this history.

Thus, when it is a matter of Art Brut, most of our elites, busy examining the artistic act, generally oscillate between categorical denial and “diabolical obstinacy” – in the words of Seneca – in order to contemplate this field.

At best they reassure themselves by assigning to it a historical backseat, determined and circumscribed by the work of Jean Dubuffet, the “inventor” of the concept. A very comfortable posture, so much was he, too, this ardent proselyte, guilty of dogmatism.

Even if we must give Dubuffet the incontestable credit for having forged a term capable of bringing about a synthesis – a crystallization, we might be tempted to say – of disparate artistic expressions, exiled until now: “the art of the mad” or psychopathological art, but also the mediumistic art so cherished by the surrealists, and finally, the art of the marginal, of “extraordinary” figures devoted to an obsessive artistic production. All working outside of the academy, the market, all de facto transgressing traditions and customs. All of them suddenly honored by an ambivalent qualifier borrowed from the vocabulary of mineralogy, underscoring at the same time their naïve and precious character.

The Art Brut Collection in Lausanne continues to eloquently bear witness to the three decades of collection that Jean Dubuffet dedicated himself to with passion.

However, where he went wrong was in declaring a criteriology based on autodidacticism and even on an absence of culture, conditions that get disqualified by even just a cursory inspection, so much are they tainted by a petty bourgeois Rousseauism. Like a faint stench of colonial thought on “art nègre” (traditional African art), supposedly infantile and uncultivated. Next, by imposing – with a certain success, alas! if we are to judge by its persistence – an iconography of Art Brut echoing his own initial research on forms. This rupture with supposedly learned art, characterized according to him by the triumphant abstraction of the period, led him to make an Epinal print of Art Brut, essentially reduced to figuration and to the recourse to rudimentary means of fabrication. Giving the false impression that the works in question almost exclusively resulted in naïve or popular art.

Now, the inventory of historical Art Brut collections, such as the one that belonged to the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn¹, to name but one, show that one Emma Hauck – interned at the start of the 20th century in Heidelberg – had no reason to envy one Cy Twombly, formally-speaking. And the examples are countless.

But Dubuffet above all pursued this neo-primitivism to the point of forcibly enlisting these artists in a combat against what is called “cultural” art. A combat that was never and could never be their own, and that, moreover, participated or at least favored their ostracism.

Yet, just as metaphysics can't be eternally reduced to the voice of Descartes, Art Brut cannot remain enclosed in Dubuffet's ghetto. Except to refuse changing paradigms.

Thus, to criticize the notion of Art Brut uniquely through the Dubuffetian thought of the 1940s is inept in more than one way: first, it is a denial of the innumerable ways of surveying this domain that appeared in the 20th century, from Hans Prinzhorn to Harald Szeemann, from André Breton to Massimiliano Gioni, to name but a few.

It is also and above all a way to obscure an entire part of the art born out of the social or mental alterity of its authors, impervious to the stakes and to art circles, claiming neither the status of artist as we understand it, nor that their productions might even be some kind of art. So much do they implement individual mythologies or auto-referential cosmogonies, sometimes bordering on *Gesamtkunstwerk*². Which alone should already make them worthy of major esteem, should we decide to see in them – through their *troubling strangeness* – a creative, primal impulse.

By refuting these “facts,” by rejecting this phenomenological approach, we invariably condemn ourselves to produce nothing but a shapeless doxa indexed by the negligence of art historical instruction, unfortunately a constant in the field. Obviously, cultural power, like any power, takes its strength especially from unshakeable certainty. And then, as Jean Rostand said in a searing alliteration: “certitude, servitude.”

In any case, this is a failure in the thinking, an inability to go beyond a terminology – however dividing and questionable it may be – which offers, however, a formidable foundation for reexamining art. Consequently, the qualifier “brut,” when it is not serving as an alibi for going one’s way, crystalizes tensions more than needed. Frequently, the very people who do not stop brandishing the epithet “contemporary” as the indispensable auxiliary to their doctrine – those people think that it would be enough to sidestep the term “brut” to avoid problematizing the artistic productions that this adjective tends to shed light on.

However, we cannot forget to mention, unless we lie by omission, the conditions of production of such works, the intimate processes that underlie them, the ontological dimension that they reveal. No more than we can minimize the personality and the résumé of these authors, which sometimes constitute the only elements capable of giving us information about their intentions and the reach of their works. Better, surely, than the most brilliant of analyses could, the most seductive of paratexts. Above all, the alterity in which these *anartists* work should provide sufficient motive to investigate the exact nature of their creations.

And what if seeking to define Art Brut meant in fine trying to define the unclassifiable, the immeasurable, the unthinkable, the in-finite? Everything that designates both the un-thought and the unthinkable. Precisely: that which surpasses reason.

What can we say about very recent inclusions of such works in the temples of culture – like the Biennale of Venice 2013, the Museum of Modern Art of Paris, the Centre Pompidou, the Maison Rouge and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, or even in the Brooklyn Museum, the Moma and the Metropolitan Museum in New York? If not that they happened, in most of the cases, incognito or, even worse, that these productions have been saddled in these places with the grotesque mask of *outsider art*, or even the condescending one of *folk art*. Nothing, then, that might allow the public to apprehend its veritable essence.

Despite that, the enthusiastic support from ever more amateurs and the efforts by some opinionated thinkers, joined by a new generation of curators and art historians, subsequently permits us to confirm Art Brut as the decisive vector for “thinking art” beyond assigned categories, beyond periods, cultures, and formal specters.

The theories on it are currently being investigated and debated with a new vitality. The historical dogmas are in the process of being overtaken and the former antagonisms are making room for a fertile dialogue. We now discover that Art Brut is equally present in photography, video, computer graphics, informatics. And its pulse is already perceptible in other, more performative domains, such as music, dance, or theater. The task that falls upon us, essential to the complete reinscription of Art Brut in its contemporaneity, will precisely consist in shedding light on new practices, new medias, as much as their international proliferation. And, departing, to allow a reconsideration of the creative act from a metaphysical perspective, indistinguishable from our human condition. To track down the archetype in it, who knows?

Among other surprises, we could thus discover that a conceptual Art Brut can not only be conceived of – as

with John Urho Kemp's work – but that it could be the most remarkable and the most essential expression of Art Brut; in this sense it would be the least guilty of trying to seduce or elicit any kind of legitimization. Not giving into the figurative or decorative temptation, nor to spectacular displays, it would attest to an art that is solidly tied to the individual, an art without addressee, in which the other, extimate, would almost be absent most of the time, and at best optional. While the intimate other would occupy all of the space.

Even though the corpus of works selected for Brut Now of course tends to account for these new forms, there could be no question of restricting our investigations to the production of a catalogue of analogies using the grammar of so-called contemporary art. The exercise, here, consists rather in breaking free from normative presuppositions and recognizing, simply, some of the most significant discoveries made in the sphere of Art Brut over the past decades.

Brut Now also rings like an interpellation whose self-conscious Anglicism tends to respond to the indigence of the Anglo-Saxon notion of outsider art, subjugated to the market to the point of having extended its hold over almost everything that isn't considered *stricto sensu* contemporary art. A hackneyed and Manichean notion if there ever was one, incidentally flattering the most reactionary fringe of commentators. Rather on the contrary, *Brut Now* must above all be understood as an injunction to a reflection freed from the shackles of fragmented and partisan knowledge, as an invitation to a feast of the spirit, capable of inflecting doctrinal postures.

The point is thus no less than to propose a foundational exhibit that will serve as a keystone and a laboratory for the art world as for the public, in order to pursue the exploration of a terra incognita as vast as it is deep and delicate. In sum, and as paradoxical as it may seem, we had perhaps not seen such an undertaking to revitalize the debate about art since the Duchampian revolution.

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(This article has been previously published as an introduction for the book *Brut Now: Art Brut in the Technological Era* published by Les Presses du réel, in 2016. This catalog documents the eponymous exhibition - curated by Christian Berst - which took place in the museum of Belfort (Tour 46) and at the Centre multimédia Gantner (Bourogne) from Oct. 29th to Jan. 16th, 2017.)

1. Hans Prinzhorn is a German psychiatrist and art historian, director of the hospital of Heidelberg, author of *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken* ("*Expressions of the Mentally Ill*"), published in 1922.

2. Translation: Total work of art (following the romantic conception).