

TAKE
SCULPTURE

The Aesthetics of Ethics

Christian Berst

(Translated from French by Thierry Betancourt)



Rock Garden.



Rock Garden (detail).



Christian Berst (born in 1964) is a publisher, gallerist, art collector, exhibition organiser and author. After pursuing his passion for Art Brut as a collector, he founded the 'Christian Berst' gallery in Paris in 2005 - the only gallery specialising in this form of art. Berst owes his reputation to an untiring pursuit of contemporary Art Brut that has taken him all over the world. As a curator, exhibition commissioner and loaner of works to museum exhibitions, he regularly publishes articles and catalogues.

When in 1958 Nek Chand set about creating a world of consolation in an isolated plot near Chandigarh, he did not imagine that half a century later, the aura surrounding him would have taken a universal appeal, nor that he would be considered the archetypal 'raw' creator, an outsider in all his imperfect wholeness.

"Today I am labeled an artist. I don't like this word 'artist'. Only God pushed me to do this work. I didn't know that others would see it, I worked for my own pleasure." With these few words Nek Chand reveals his view of 'creators' whose craft does not prescribe to the history of art, nor does he believe his work in its original matter bears any relation to any other. It is precisely this mystique that - as often seen with marginal demiurges - chooses not to concern itself

with the normal world but rather focuses on immanence.

After the Second World War, Jean Dubuffet conceived of an 'art brut' where 'brut' or raw is understood within the context of diamonds or gold: that is, both precious even in their rough extracted state. Following the ideas of renowned contemporary psychiatrists such as the German Prinzhorn or the French Réja, as well as intellectual artists such as Breton, Klee or Kandinsky - he began to search for artists who were entirely ignored from the art world. His search for an alternative drove him to asylums where schizophrenics gifted with a creative genius would develop a cosmology of their own. His prospection extended to spiritual mediums who, creating works seemingly derived from a form of automatism, believed themselves to be the intercessors of the forces above.

In his search, Dubuffet met with what appeared to be more ordinary persons whose artistic creations proved far from ordinary and of unfounded origins. Despite the fact that these people lived on the fringes of society, nothing appeared to predispose them to such a manifestation of artistic creation. Paradoxically, he would refer to these people in his texts as 'ordinary men', however their destinies and creations would prove quite 'extraordinary', even if the radicalism of their approach seemed less obvious than an alienated designer. In France, the emblematic figure of this movement was the postman Cheval, whose ideal Palace built between 1879 and 1912 is a Babelian edifice, entirely syncretic in its architecture.

Today still, academic laziness

assimilates the productions of a Nek Chand and a Ferdinand Cheval to the garrisons of 'popular' art by forgetting that they belong to no lineage, refer to no particular tradition or rather transgress both their heritage and the vernacular habitus which would otherwise condition them.

Therefore Nek Chand, without any apparent artistic genealogy, never preoccupied himself with a pre-existing model, moreover realised his magnum opus in obstruction of the law. The clandestine appropriation of public property without permission would have otherwise condemned this urban project to destruction. However, as early as 1976, when the authorities discovered this site, not only did they encourage Mr. Chand to continue, but furthermore allocated funds both monetary and human to develop his artistic enterprise. The *Kingdom of Gods and Goddesses* re-baptised *Rock Garden* is the only 'irregular' architecture in the world having gone from an individual's whim to that of a collective work of national importance.

Better yet, he eventually became a counterweight, an extreme alternative to the other great national urban project happening at the time: Le Corbusier's Chandigarh. Nek Chand's vision contradicts Le Corbusier's assertion that "contemporary architecture focuses on the house, the ordinary house for ordinary men. It abandons the palaces. Here is the sign of the times."

Where the West offered India, on its way to modernisation, a rational model for the management of space and habitat, a modest worker from this same site took upon himself in a parallel manner to erect a symbolic house for his dreams, an open-air

palace. But rather than a philosophical antagonism - Nek Chand was never opposed to the architectural project going on in his city. The 'kingdom of the forest' he created proposes a reconciliation between man and nature, of the profane and the sacred. A reconciliation founded in part on the abolition of utilitarianism as a supreme model but also a utopia capable of reinforcing the links between man and his roots, both spiritual and historic. Interestingly this project emanated, as with most marginal creators, from a personal trauma, an existential rupture: in the case of Mr. Chand, from the trauma of partition and the chaotic eastward exodus out of Pakistan.

The question if this experience stems from the paradigm of 'raw' architecture, hence essentially individualistic, or if instead creates a paradox due to the belonging and shared experience of an entire society is of little importance. Through the Rock Garden of Chandigarh, aside from the prodigious nature of his work, Mr. Nek Chand seems to have resolved a tension between the aspirations of a people towards modernist emancipation and the irrepressible need to preserve intact the bridges of its collective imagination.

He successfully creates a language that borders on the universal whilst assigning a function to art that transcends the aesthetic in favour of its essential dimension: his ethic.

Photo credit: Diwan Manna