From the Art of the Insane to Art brut and Beyond: A History of Reception

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- 1 To begin with, in the 1900s, art of the insane was deemed as having neither institutional nor market value. When doctors granted it any semiological value, it was only to practice their trade, in which case the works were thoroughly discussed in order to better characterise mental pathologies. Their therapeutic purpose was also emphasised: art-making, just like gardening, kept the patients busy. When Dr. Auguste Marie created a museum in the Villejuif mental asylum and organised exhibitions on the outside, these humanism-suffused good deeds defended, from both inside and outside the institution, the idea of bridging the gap between mental patients and supposedly normal people, of lessening their alleged strangeness and helping to resist the ostracising law of 1838.
- 2 This openness was seized upon by avant-garde artists and writers, who, in their pursuit of new forms, paid close attention to anything that would help them challenge their

habits or bring them face to face with Otherness, anything that would make them feel exotic: Oceanian or African art (geographic exoticism); so-called primitive civilisations (temporal exoticism); art by children or the insane (exoticism of their own alter egos). When, following World War II, Jean Dubuffet reclaimed the vein that some alienists had previously explored, and despite the fact that André Breton had stressed the efforts made by several “psychiatrists”, as they were now called (including Marcel Réja and Hans Prinzhorn), Jean Dubuffet intended to widen what he defined as *Art brut* [Outsider art] to the work of “any person estranged from mainstream artistic milieus, who knows little about them and deliberately steers clear of them.”

- 3 Nowadays of course, there has been much discussion as to the circumstances of Dubuffet’s desire to paradoxically avoid culture and institutions. This was due to a long-standing and widely-shared understanding of art, that Dubuffet evaded, defending “art that does not lie in the beds that were made for it”, thereby acknowledging this form, protecting it as a curator, administrating and institutionalising it. In this sense Jean Dubuffet’s accomplishments are similar to those of Marcel Duchamp for both himself, by concentrating his works at the Philadelphia museum, and for the artists he supported, such as Louis Eilshemius and Constantin Brancusi. In this case, Jean Dubuffet was more than just a collector. His goal was to sanctify and protect works that could not be shown in museums.
- 4 Recent editions or re-editions of books about Outsider art can be classified as different attempts at justification, as so many landmarks in the history of reception. The publication of the typescript for the *Almanach de l’art brut*, which Dubuffet never completed, can be likened to a kind of psychoanalytical working through or self-interpretation (the fact it is published as a facsimile emphasises the effect of reality). The *Almanach* tries to establish the process through which the analysis incorporates interpretations, and tries to overcome the resistances it provokes by empirically removing that which seems to contradict the idea of Outsider art whose definition Dubuffet is refining. In this book, genetic editing could find good examples of the tergiversations and predilections that act, in a text, as so many variations that are likely to lead to the best wording. The goal of exposing the correspondence between Jean Dubuffet and Alain Bourbonnais is to illustrate and clarify the nature of Jean Dubuffet’s gaze.
- 5 His stance is noticeably “counter-cultural”. Dubuffet stands firm, expunging any comparison to art history, maintaining a strict position on the designation of Outsider art, at the expense of “non-standard” art. This incomplete book and correspondence demonstrate an ongoing process of “artification”. Jean Dubuffet surrounded himself with important names and organised exhibitions. And as his renown as a painter grew, his discourse became more and more uncompromising and strict. He published texts that resembled manifestos.
- 6 In 1976 when he donated his collection and opened a museum in Lausanne, Dubuffet tended towards pleasure and growth, fuelled by his passion for recreating the art world. From 1964 onwards, he carried out the publication of the *Art Brut* booklets, of which he wrote the first eight instalments. Better still, he was a mobiliser. The books that came out, and that were often re-published, aimed at making the collection known, setting the inventory, documenting and describing the works. The successive curators of the museum were charged with publishing exhibition catalogues and more general, didactical books: Michel Thévoz (*L’Art brut*, 1980, 1991, 2016) and Lucienne

Peiry (*L'Art brut*, 1997, 2006, 2016). Each of them carries out, in keeping with the times and their own viewpoint, various promotional strategies. Michel Thévoz conducts a Foucauldian analysis, in which he considers Outsider art as the return of the repressed of Western culture, drawing the legitimacy of its protest at once from the psychiatric order, perceived as repressive, and from hostility towards the institution. Jean Dubuffet himself continued to enrich the definition by acknowledging similar or pastiche forms. This is why, in 1982, he created *Neuve Invention*, represented by such figures as Louis Soutter, Jean-Joseph Sanfourche, Philippe Dereux, Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern and Gaston Chaissac. As an example, Philippe Dereux was a retired schoolteacher and a collage artist who used vegetable peels, bark, seeds and dried legumes. In the summertime, he watered Jean Dubuffet's garden in Vence and helped him collect a large number of butterflies. This shows the extent to which Dubuffet, in his own artistic practice, resorted to experimentation. Even his love for gardens, hardy plants and soil did not predate his paintings. According to him, it was quite the opposite that occurred: "It was by making these paintings that I learned how to love the gardens that resembled my paintings."¹ His "Tableaux d'assemblages" (1955-1956) were collages of fragments of paintings, textures, ink-stained pieces of paper. His exploration of Outsider art can be seen in a similar light: it reinforced his propensity to find forms. This extension/expansion echoes the gradually triumphant concept of Outsider art, and the growing scarcity of artworks after the 1950s, when neuroleptics were invented and psychoactive drugs came into use, as well as the need to persevere. Lucienne Peiry widens the research field to various countries in Europe, along with Japan, China, Bali, Ghana and Brazil. She also turns towards deficiencies and organic or lesional disorders that cause dysfunctions in normal expression.

- 7 Over the course of this institutionalisation, the history of the reception of Outsider art went hand in hand with the connoisseurs' search for, and accumulation of, photographs and films, as well as the creation of parallel collections, which, although they were little known at first, were also quickly sanctified. Inevitably, there started to be a market for Outsider art.
- 8 Thus, Outsider art was now at the crossroads of different viewpoints, including the perspective of contemporary artists. This was the case when Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely (she had introduced him to the *Facteur Cheval*, and they visited the *Manège de Petit Pierre* together) placed works by Giovanni Battista Podestà inside their *Cyclop*. It was also the case with Hervé Di Rosa's "modest arts". Therefore, Outsider art's body of work necessarily displays variations, as demonstrated by the constellation of terminologies gravitating around it like an aura. However, the fact that the choice of criteria used to define Outsider art is so unstable at its periphery only reinforces the existence of a fixed core.
- 9 In recent years, discussions have arisen as to what is "Brut Now" (resorting to English to assure its modernity). What will happen with new technologies and the possibilities offered by photocopiers, smartphones, video games, computers, various software programs, and photography, that has been neglected up until now? Given that Jean Dubuffet had gathered 5000 artworks in 1975, and that the collection today has reached 70,000 works, one can only imagine its future increase.

NOTES

1. Dubuffet, Jean, Paulhan, Jean. *Correspondance 1944-1968*, Paris : Gallimard, 2003, p. 725