The Art Brut Situation

Marc Décimo
Translator: Simon Pleasance
It is noteworthy that, in the past few years, one or two publications have attempted to take stock of the notion of Art brut, among them the volume edited by Martine Lusardy and the Devenir de l’Art feature article in the magazine Ligeia. These attempts are probably the result of the extensions that the notion in question has been repeatedly undergoing. The opportunity to better define Art brut has thus made itself felt. Jean Dubuffet himself had already contributed to this development by creating the collection “Neuve Invention”, an adjacent area which enabled him to tighten the criteria, not easy to draw up, around a standard collection which he then worked on. Early on in La Clé des champs, André Breton concerned himself with outlining from what alienist traditions Dubuffet’s thinking issued, at least in France, by scattering a few names about. Historians subsequently had no option but to specify those contexts and there is a very strong chance that, in the years to come, there will be many more such studies focusing on “the art of the insane”, for example, and carrying on the investigation of countries like Russia, and the Eastern Europe states. Lydia Couet is shortly to submit to the university of Bourgogne Franche-Comté a dissertation titled Soigner la folie et collectionner “l’art des fous”. L’art asiliaire au XIXe siècle: archéologie de l’Art brut. Let us remember the groundbreaking book by John M. MacGregor, published in 1989, The Discovery of the Art of the Insane. The activities of the hegemonic figure of the doctor and criminologist Cesare Lombroso also undoubtedly merit a re-appraisal, currently being encouraged by the Museum of Criminal Anthropology in Turin, which has undertaken to make the documentation it holds available. Defining allegedly “naïve” practices calls for accuracy. In this respect, L’Art naïf (1994) by Charles Schaettel in the Que sais-je? collection is still a necessary tool for having drawn up a general grammar of the works he regards as naïve. Such forgers have not been lacking, which indicates the public’s infatuation and the fact that stylistic factors can be allocated. In the proceedings of the recent conference L’Art brut existe-t-il?, some studies focus on the contextual environment, meaning that they establish how the pivotal works in Jean Dubuffet’s collection are, perforce, part and parcel of mid-19th century western culture. Cécile Bargues reminds us about the Dadaist fascination for art made
by children’, and, in his foreword to the book, Laurent Gervereau talks about the attraction felt by an artist like Maurice de Vlaminck for “kids’ drawings”: in them the painter saw the truth of the work, a sort of creative and supposedly “pure” impulse. There is still more work to do. There would seem to be much to study where spiritualists are concerned. I refer to the current show Lesage, Simon, Crépin : peintres, spiritistes et guérisseurs at the LaM (4 October 2019-5 January 2020). Can we squeeze Auguste Lesage and Victorien Sardou into the same pigeonhole? It is clear that a case-by-case examination is called for, and that the criteria still need working on and refining.

2 In Art brut et psychanalyse, Pascal Roman grapples with “an exploration of the creative process”, without delving into any laborious psycho-biographical study for the cases he deals with. This is not his goal. In the tradition, above all, of Didier Anzieu, who sequences, in the laboratory of psychic life, the work of dreams, mourning, and creation, and in the tradition of Michel de M’Uzan, who tends to see therein a treatment of precise traumatic traces, Pascal Roman’s intent is to generalize and “enrich a psychoanalytical modelling of the process of symbolization”.

3 The circle drawn around Jean Dubuffet deserves attention, even if it probably no longer holds any major surprises. We must now rummage through the nooks and crannies. So it is with this work undertaken around Edith Boissonnas, a little-known close friend of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Paulhan, one of the co-founders of the Compagnie de l’Art brut, and a major figure in the cultural landscape of the postwar years. In L’Art brut existe-t-il ?, Anna Pravdová and Bertrand Schmitt draw our attention to Jan Křížek, a sculptor of Czech origin. All studies of the immediate, or more or less removed, context tend to explain the emergence of the notion. They need to be set down warily. Baptiste Brun has tackled the task, not only in Jean Dubuffet et la besogne de l’Art brut: critique du primitivisme, but also with Isabelle Marquette in L’Art brut existe-t-il ?; Hugo Daniel also deals with the subject of psycho-pathological art of the 1950s, as does Marianne Jakobi, who, incidentally, is Jean Dubuffet’s co-biographer.

4 The search is not, however, aimed just at the past. The success of the notion is henceforth associated, above all, with the extensions that Art brut’s prospectors have been ceaselessly developing, on various pretexts—capitalist, symbolic, and anthropological. What was initially limited to a small part of western Europe has become an international quest in recent years. This has had the effect of renewing approaches to the phenomenon on every continent (Mario del Curto; Florence Pizzorni). Attention has also shifted to media like photography, music (Laurent Pascal), Internet sites (which can be involved in eclectic activities) and the “cinémodeste”, a spirited forgery produced by Léontine Fiat. These shifts are not just geographical and disciplinary. The notion of Art brut has spread to handicaps, and physical and mental deficiencies (Bruno Gérard, on the Fondation Paul Duhem; Arianne Dahan, on the Fondation John BOST). But some cases already resulted from this. Judith Scott, for example, suffered from Down’s syndrome. A humanist argument, akin to the one formerly developed by the alienists, and unassailable, explained this openness. But the aesthetic question is inevitably based on it. What do we remember of these productions? Who—what eye—can discern what might be liable to being “artified” or not? Who, in Jean Dubuffet’s place, will identify, among all these practices, the resolutely different, idiosyncratic discourse? If the work should never be released from its conditions of enunciation, and illustrate its author’s rather modest social
background, his isolation, his self-taught status (these are trends) and his "double activity" (Emmanuel Pernoud\textsuperscript{19}), who will be authorized to check for any possible falsification?

Lastly, after the Dadaists, and the Surrealists, and like Jean Dubuffet, the prospect has become enlarged, because a handful of contemporary artists have found confirmations among certain practitioners of Art brut for the exercise of their own activity—in the choice, for example, of recycled materials, in \textit{bricolage}—, and for the search for forms. Which is echoed today by many Art brut creators, informed by the media, by declaring themselves “artists”. The deal, the representation they make of their activity, has changed. Likewise, in a word, the vision we have of a figure like Georges Focus—a 17\textsuperscript{th} century artist who went mad—is augmented by retro-motivation. A recent exhibition\textsuperscript{20} at the Paris School of Fine Arts and a 447-page catalogue brought Focus back into favour (Nicolas Surlapierre\textsuperscript{21}). The vision of the Art brut women in the 1960s is analyzed through the lens of current gender theories (Emilie Bouvart\textsuperscript{22}). As an immediate and inevitable corollary of this set of assertions, works and environments are being patrimonialized (Véronique Moulinié\textsuperscript{23}; Valérie Rousseau\textsuperscript{24}). The fate of Art brut is thus staked out by high and not so high points, syncopes which make it visible, controversial, current, changing, and alive. This, give or take a little, is the situation of the notion in 2019 in its various perspectives and its processes of recognition. Art brut is forever being reconfigured, smoothed and re-burnished, as a notion that is being at once tightened and broadened.

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**NOTES**

12. Jakob, Marianne. “.L’Art brut, une invention partagée avec André Breton ?", ibid., p. 68-75
15. Pascal, Laurent. “Pourquoi la musique brute est-elle invisible ?”, ibid., p. 146-149
19. Pernoud, Emmanuel. “Les Tableaux d’un pâtissier, les sculptures d’un bouchonnier : la double activité selon Dubuffet”, ibid., p. 82-87

AUTHORS

MARC DÉCIMO

Marc Décimo is professor of Contemporary Art History (Université Paris Nanterre). His latest books are: Les Jocondes à moustaches (2014); Des fous et des hommes avant l’Art brut (2017); Le Texte à l’épreuve de la folie et de la littérature (with Tanka G. Tremblay) (2017); Coloquintessence (2017).