

Michel Thévoz

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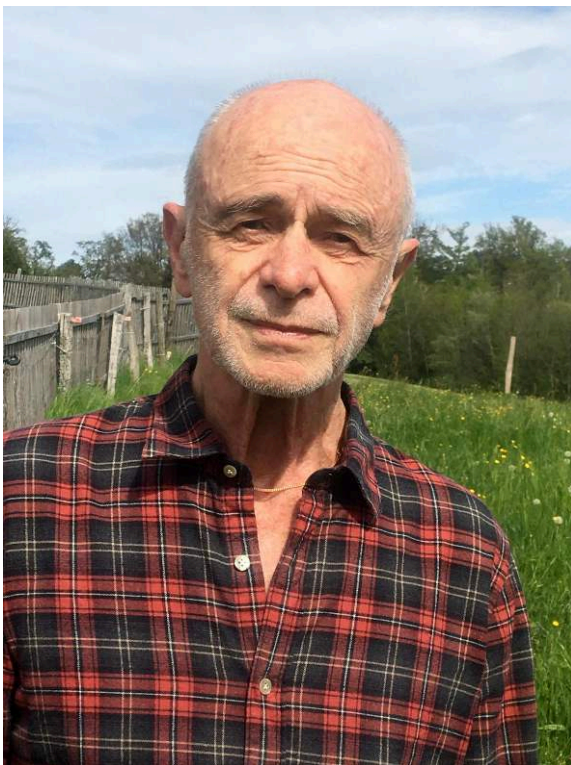
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Michel Thévoz, 2020 © Katia Furter, with courtesy of the Michel Thévoz

- 1 Lines of thought exist which disturb and at times irritate as much as they stimulate. The line adopted by the art historian, museum and exhibition curator and essayist Michel Thévoz is one such, inasmuch as turns indiscipline and contrariness into driving principles, and a method. To the question: “Does Art Brut exist?” which Laurent Gervereau posed him in 2018, he replied in a spirit of mischievous provocation: “No”.¹ And yet... Born in Lausanne (Switzerland) in 1936, Michel Thévoz polished his

historian's and critic's spurs by focusing on a doctoral research project about Louis Soutter, the most unusual painter there was in the Vaud district, the canton about which the writer Charles Ferdinand Ramuz expressed all the bad things he thought with regard to its conformity.² Through that choice dating back to the 1960s—approved by the highly conservative Bernard Dorival as part of a last year dissertation at the Ecole du Louvre!—there could already be implicitly glimpsed the man's career—a liking for reprobates, and everything that he then enjoyed designating as stemming from borderline phenomena (madness, mediumism, the aesthetics of suicide and fantasies of academicism, among others). This seminal work simplified his relation with Jean Dubuffet. The great zealot of Art Brut passed him the baton, by noting the donation of the collection of the same name to the City of Lausanne, of which Michel Thévoz became the first director in 1976. In the previous year he had published the first monograph on the subject with Skira, taking note of a transfer of authority on the matter: the young man renewed an approach hitherto fiercely defended by the painter. From then on, the ferment over anti-psychiatry marked the thinking about Art Brut. Teaching at Lausanne university, and an assiduous reader of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, Michel Thévoz worked with the psychoanalytical tool—which Jean Dubuffet had kept at a distance until then—on art forms described as marginal. He was more especially interested in those which intermingle writing and graphics to a point where they cannot be told apart, describing, based on a line of thinking about language, a genealogy of deviance and its corollaries, conditioning and conformism.³ The challenge consisted, above all, in envisaging the work of culture, and in particular its repression, in the formation of the values underpinning it. We might reproach his thinking for at times simplistic schemes, as when he alternately shifted from the term regression to that of archaism, without making sure he did not tumble into the rut of primitivism as a component of the history of 20th century art. But Michel Thévoz's merit resides precisely in this form of excess which, from any viewpoint, constitutes a very necessary epistemological risk. Whence his predilection for aberrations and their heuristic power: by working turn by turn on Andy Warhol's wig, Jules Doudin's scribbles, Charles Gleyre's "academic" nudes and Christian Boltanski's "dead Swiss", Michel Thévoz likes to irritate. In advocating turning things inside out, he de-territorializes concepts and notions until he makes them split open, by showing the arbitrary character of what structures them and, in so doing, their political dimension: "The pathological sheds light on the normal," psychiatrists would say—an assertion that must be immediately reversed: anomaly sheds light on our consensual pathology".⁴ As the extension of a show which he put together at the Collection de l'Art Brut in the winter of 2021, the title of Michel Thévoz's latest book drives home the nail: *Pathologie du cadre*.⁵

NOTES

1. Thévoz, Michel. "L'Art Brut n'existe pas", *L'Art Brut existe-t-il ?*, Paris : Lienart, 2019. Edited by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Laurent Gervereau, p. 120-125

2. Thévoz, Michel. *Louis Soutter*, Lausanne : La Rencontre, 1970
3. See among others the anthologie *Ecrits bruts*, writings selected and introduced by M. Thévoz, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1979 ; Thévoz, Michel. *Détournement d'écriture*, Paris : Ed. de Minuit, 1989, (Critique) ; more recently, a stimulating contribution in *Ecrire en dessinant : quand la langue cherche son autre*, Milan : Skira ; Lausanne : Collection de l'Art Brut ; Geneva : Centre d'art contemporain Genève, 2020.
4. Thévoz, Michel. "Fin de partie ?", postscript to the re-publication of *L'Art Brut* [1975], Paris : La Différence, 2016, p. 228
5. Thévoz, Michel. *Pathologie du cadre : quand l'Art Brut s'éclate*, Paris : Ed. de Minuit, 2020, (Paradoxe)