

The long and winding journey of Outsider Art. An historical perspective

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SUMMARY. **Aims** – The article describes the evolution of Outsider Art from the birth of its term in 1972 to the present and its emancipation from the margin to the markets, still in progress. **Results** – Tracing the evolution of Outsider Art evidences a stark contradiction. On one hand the art world of collectors, historians, art dealers and *admirateurs*, accepts without reservation artwork that for many years was kept in a marginal position, compared to the “insider” art establishment. On the other hand art experts cannot agree on a universal definition of this category of art. The particular status of the outsider artists is one of the reasons that causes difficulty in reaching a definition of Outsider Art. Significant *atelier* experiences with psychiatric patients delineate the difference between an Outsider Art work and a work produced by Art Therapy. **Conclusions** – The art market of art dealers and art collectors can be identified as the place where these contradictions dissolve, and where the Outsider Art category finds its ultimate legitimation and international recognition.

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THE BIRTH OF OUTSIDER ART

The English term Outsider Art was coined by the British art writer Roger Cardinal who said in his book “Outsider Art”, published in 1972, “*I believe that a paramount factor in the critical definition of the creative Outsider is that he or she should be possessed of an expressive impulse and should then externalize that impulse in an unmonitored way which defies conventional art-historical contextualization*”. (Cardinal, 1972).

Cardinal sustained that the term “Outsider Art”, embodied the most faithful translation of what Dubuffet (1901-1985) had intended when he proposed the French term *Art Brut*. In an unforeseeable way the new word “Outsider Art”, as soon as it became part of the receptive world, began living its own life and achieved autonomy from its creator, becoming the brand under which any minimal oscillation in the sphere of “the crude” art, “not educated” and “pure” art since then is recorded.

Outsider Art is not an artistic movement that can be related to all other “isms” born in 20th century. Cubism,

Futurism, Dadaism, and so on, are all movements in which it is possible to recognize the founding artistic personalities. These are movements marked by ideological guidelines and stylistic choices. Outsider Art, on the contrary, is a genre lacking in manifestos, and at first sight, bereft of members. The term Outsider Art is used by historians, critics and collectors, not in order to identify an art identifiable for its formal characters, but in order to define the status of the persons who created it. The artists, who act inside Outsider Art, generally do not have familiarity with fine art, in the sense that they do not perceive their own position inside the art system, and do not even presuppose an ambit of the art made of critics, collectors and dealers.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MEANING “OUTSIDER ART”

Several reasons exist for the difficulty in defining what is or is not Outsider Art. Firstly, its meaning today does not completely match that of Art Brut. Outsider Art includes various artistic streams, like Visionary Art, part of the American Folk Art and Contemporary Folk Art movements. These, besides Art Brut, Neue Invention and Naïve Art, are all to be found under the Outsider Art label. Secondly, the universe of Outsider Art seems to be

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lacking in dominant aesthetic criteria; it seems to be irreducible to guidelines that allow the observer to have a linear understanding of the phenomenon. The critic and the historian therefore find themselves disarmed.

To try to trace the history of Outsider Art means therefore to narrate the history of an idea of this art, because Outsider Art, in any time and place it has been produced, is an art nearly always unchained from the rest of (art) history. Especially from the point of view of the artists, it is an art that cannot entrust an inheritance; it does not have a goldmine of traditions from which to take advice. Outsider Art finds its force in the imminent conditions of its creation.

The first comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon goes back to the mid 20th century, thanks to Dubuffet. Dubuffet identified this art without a name as Art Brut and conferred on it a status in the history of art.

In *Art Brut Préfère aux Art Culturelles*, the catalogue of the exhibition taken place in 1945 in Paris at the Galerie Drouin, Dubuffet writes that Art Brut is “*that product created from persons immune from the artistic culture, in which mimetism plays a minimal part if not any, in a different way from the activities of the intellectuals. These artists derive all, subjects, the choice of materials, symbolologies, rhythms, style, etc., from the personal interiority, and not from the conventions of the traditional and fashionable art. We find ourselves head to head with a pure, completely crude artistic operation, reinvented in all its procedures subsequent exclusively to the impulses of the artist itself. This is an art that manifests an incomparable creative power, different from the cultural art in its chameleonic and grotesque aspects.*” (Dubuffet, 1967). Dubuffet describes us an art that not necessarily originates in mental institutions, but which preferably finds a fertile ground in places untouched by (mainstream) culture, as mental institutions were supposed to be. A pure art resistant to whichever preconception, that cannot be rendered witness of any classification.

The definition of Art Brut in 1945 was so rigid and restrictive that Dubuffet (1971), when it came to the time to name the Annex Collection of Lausanne, created the new category “Neuve Invention” which was capable of including all those artists like Gaston Chaissac (1910-1964) or Louis Soutter (1871-1942), who entertained relationships with the traditional society more than the notion of Art Brut admitted.

The difference between Art Brut and the rest of the art that could not be characterized as such, but did not even enter in other categories, became more obvious in 1972, at the time when the architect and collector Alain Bourbonnais, under Dubuffet’s supervision, exposed Brut

artists, like Aloïse Corbaz (1886-1964), deciding to include in the collection also self-taught artists who were never institutionalized. The pieces of the Bourbonnais collection, called by Alain Bourbonnais *hors the normes*, beyond the norm, were mainly representative of the French rural Expressionism, and almost none was the creation of an artist affected by mental disease (Maizels, 1996).

The conquest of an increasing wide perspective by the Outsider phenomenon can be recognized at the time when the most important exhibition of Outsider Art was held in London, organized at the Hayward Gallery on 5th February 1979 under the supervision of Roger Cardinal and Victor Musgrave. In the preface of the catalogue Musgrave (1979) wrote: “*This is an art without precedent*”.

It offers an orphic journey to the depths of the human psyche, filled with amazing incident, overflowing with feeling and emotion yet always disciplined by superlative technical resources”. The exhibition was visited by 40.000 people. In the same year the Third Eye Centre of Glasgow organized the exhibition *Another World*. All the artworks excluded from the Art Brut that had lived a clandestine life under the shadow of the official art now found visibility. Particularly after these two big events galleries and museums increasingly showed interest in this territory of imprecise borders, in which the only compass in order to orient oneself seemed to be the notion of Outsider Art.

Outsider Art, understood as artistic category, became after the Seventies a convenient and popular label for the classification of any art work born far from the fine arts, and from the moment it was exported in the United States it started losing its original meaning as intended by Dubuffet.

This evidence is clearly outlined by the New York writer and art dealer Jane Kallir, who observed that: “*The problem of definition only grew worse when Art brut was translated into English and eventually travelled to the United States as ‘Outsider Art’. The British definition did not, at first, differ markedly from Dubuffet’s admittedly nebulous definition of Art Brut. However, as Outsider Art began to gain currency in the United States, the definition started to blur. The sharp division that Dubuffet had seen between the naïve and the brut, difficult enough to sustain in Europe, proved even more untenable in America. The kind of theoretical hairsplitting so dear to the Europeans – between naïve and brut, between true brut and Neuve Invention – never had much appeal in the United States. Without this theoretical rigor, the term ‘outsider’ became increasingly meaningless*”. (cited in Maizels, 2001). From the end of the Sixties, in the United States the idea began to diffuse that the artist’s profession was not that one to create Beauty, but that of opposing any dominant

tendency and to refuse the collective consent. This idea became so common that it was nearly impossible to think of an artist who was not an “outsider”. The reception of the Outsider Art in the United States therefore is fixed to issues of political identity and social acceptance, rather than aesthetic and philosophical issues.

OUTSIDER ART AND THE THERAPEUTIC CONTEXT

During the second half of the 20th century and beyond, Outsider Art had to keep up the fight against the exclusion from the art world until the foundation of the Collection the Art Brut in Lausanne in 1976. The foundation of the Swiss Museum signals the end of the clandestine existence to which this art had been condemned. The acceptance of Outsider Art in the ambit of official art seems to have been facilitated by the same culture of the 20th century, a pluralistic culture that allows access to whichever object in the field of the art.

Today Outsider Art seems to have to face an inverted picture in respect to its initial condition. While thanks to Dubuffet the identity of the Art Brut was certain and incontrovertible, today it seems extremely complicated to define the status of the Outsider artist, and Outsider Art itself. The reasons of this complexity can be identified in the transformations undergone in western society’s structure since Dubuffet’s time after the second world war. Today we are part of a culture that facilitates contacts between individuals. The access to the unproblematic transmission of images and information, the increasing impact of the mass media and the possibility of communication in a more and more rapid and immediate way facilitates the spread of knowledge and adjournment. These transformations could not have had an effect also on the status of the Brut artist. Dubuffet searched after productions of self-taught artists untouched by culture, particularly in the psychiatric asylums, because there he could be certain about the effective social isolation of the patients. Nowadays this position is unsustainable. A mental health service priority is to maintain the patients in the community in which they live and to reinforce contacts between ill and healthy individuals, in order to reduce the stigma attached to mental disorder (see also Rosen, 2007).

With regard to the art works produced in the *ateliers* attached to psychiatric institutions, one of the objections often made was that psychiatric treatments used to stabilize patients would attenuate, if not suffocate, the spontaneous creativity of the person. Against this position some cite the example of Van Gogh, because only after his

detention in the hospital close to Saint-Remy de Provence he created the masterpieces of his late production. Others, more pragmatically, remember that individuals with mental illness, particularly those who suffer from schizophrenia in the acute phase of the disease, do not show any interest in the activities of daily life (Goldberg *et al.*, 1996), let alone towards artistic activities, preferring to withdraw from social interaction. Acute schizophrenic symptomatology thus usually contradicts the myth that supposes that authentic artistic productions can only be generated in suffering conditions. Moreover, art work attempted by individuals with psychosis are often much less coherent if produced when in an acute relapse.

The objections made against pharmacological therapies are similar to those made against Art Therapy, considered as an accomplice factor for the death of the “pure” and “authentic” Outsider Art. Art Therapy has been accused of interfering in the spontaneous creative process of the artists, leading to artistic creations lacking in quality. While mental diseases cannot be a requisite for being an artist, the purpose of art therapy is not that of the artistic creation. Art therapy has to be understood from the rehabilitative perspective (see also the definition in Rosen, 2007). Art therapy offers, through the creative act and the aesthetic experience, the possibility for psychodynamic interpretations. That means that a picture or a collection of pictures interesting from a psychiatric point of view, is not necessarily fascinating from the artistic point of view (Rhodes, 2000) and vice versa.

The most well known *atelier* for artist patients in the international panorama is certainly the House of Artists of Gugging, close to Vienna. Founded in 1981 by the psychiatrist Dr. Leo Navratil as a space where patient-artists could develop their own expressive abilities, it started to donate its artistic productions to the Company of the Art Brut much before the constitution of its own establishment. The examples of the Gugging studio, where well-known Outsider artists discovered and experienced their creativity, like Johann Hauser, and of the numerous Italian studios attached to psychiatric institutions, demonstrated that treatment does not necessarily interfere with the creativity of an artist. Firstly, this is because artistic practice is promoted or as a communicative and social instrument in order to increase the quality of the life of the resident patient, or, according to Navratil’s principles, as a therapeutic action in itself, as an enrichment tool for the person’s inner life (Rhodes, 2000). Secondly, because the autonomy of Art Therapy with respect to psychiatric treatment is underlined by the characteristic features of the spaces reserved for the artistic activities, spaces that are (often physically) separate

from the medical structures. In accordance with this rationale, these studios are meant to promote free expressive manifestations and the majority of the created artworks are destined to be exposed or to be sold to collectors.

TODAY'S PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

The art historian Lucienne Peiry (2001), today the chief curator of the *Collection de l'Art Brut* of Lausanne, identifies in the secret, clandestine and unforeseeable nature and in its subversive force the distinctive characteristics of the Art Brut. Taking this for granted, on one side she announces the death of the "historical" Art Brut caused by the modern development of western contemporary civilization. On the other she sees a possible rebirth of this art through all those who today are not influenced or touched by social and cultural norms and solicitations. One of the possible groups who could accept the Dubuffet inheritance could be recognized, according to the historian, in the refugees and in the survivors of war, or in individuals who are socially and psychologically exiled. Alongside this new Art Brut, the original one would become a theoretical frame of reference.

Michel Thevoz, who was the curator of the Swiss museum before Peiry, aligns himself to Roger Cardinal, writing: "*Art Brut, or Outsider Art, consists in the workings produced by persons who for several reasons have not been culturally educated or socially conditioned. They are citizens who live at the margins of society. Working outside the system of the Fine Arts (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their inner life and for themselves and no others, works of exceptional originality from a conceptual, material and technical point of view. These works have nothing to owe to fashion or tradition*". (Thevoz, 1975).

Positions like the one sustained by Peiry, or Thevoz, have fed the idea, diffused not only in Europe, of the necessity to distinguish between Art Brut and Outsider Art, but they have not substantially contributed to the defining criteria of the Outsider Art phenomenon. The impossibility to give a clear definition is caused by the nature of the phenomenon itself, which is still fluctuating.

A wide range of definitions were proposed in the last years. Danto (cited by Rexer, 2003) defines the Outsider artist as an artist who is unaware of the existence of the world of the art, and thus cannot consider his/her own position inside the art field. If this is so, an Outsider artist would represent merely a pawn in a game whose rules are made by others. In my opinion this simplification

could lead to extreme distinctions, not dissimilar to the "anticultural" ones of Dubuffet. As Rexer (2003) said "*there is no reason to deny a picture of Mark Rothko or a sculpture of Cornelia Parker, for being able to appreciate a work of Adolf Wölfli or Martin Ramirez*". Moreover, the definition given by Danto, as we have seen, would introduce some difficulties in being applied to contemporary society.

Rexer, in order to define Outsider Art, relies upon the diagnostic categories of psychosis, schizophrenia and autism, and states that Outsider Art is the work of persons who are institutionalized or whose psyche is to consider "compromised" (Rexer, 2003). The author resorts to psychiatric classifications with demonstrated validity in order to avoid feeding controversies that concern the origin, the limits and the political correctness of less objective definitions of Outsider Art, for example those based on rather vague aesthetic evaluations reflected in terms such as "pure", "strange" or "beautiful". Similar criteria of which History of Art has abused in the past are nowadays largely contested. The definition given by Rexer is similar to the one of MacGregor (Gordon, 2003) who confirms and widens it, including in the Outsider art category also the art productions born in conditions where the mental state is deeply altered, for example during mystical states.

In 1989 appeared the first edition of the international journal *Raw Vision* edited by John Maizels. The Journal's aim was to make the Outsider Art phenomenon accessible to the mainstream public and to offer an instrument for monitoring a still unexplored field. In the online edition (Maizels, 2001) the Journal resolves the controversy around the exact definition of Outsider Art by indicating eight formal distinctions in order to sign-post the stream of definitions. According to the authors a constant common denominator to all eight categories of Outsider Art (Neuve Invention, Art Brut, Outsider Art, Folk Art/Contemporary Folk Art, Marginal Art/Art Singulier, Visionary Art/Intuitive Art, Naive Art, Visionary Environments) is the emphasis on the particular intensity and purity of the vision and on the undefinable, but tangible freshness of invention, in other words what Maizels calls "raw vision".

THE ART MARKET AND THE ART DEALERS

As we have seen, the points of view on Outsider Art are manifold, but all the differences seem to dissolve in the common intention of defending the category. All opinions agree in the need to protect the Outsider Art genre from abuse, and all emphasize that to be an Outsider artist it is not enough to be simply inexpert, naïve or mentally disturbed.

A concrete solution to the issue of the diversity between Outsider and "Insider" art seems to come from the world of the art attended by who is not directly involved in the urgency to find answers: that is the art market and the museums, which over the last twenty years have opened their doors to this irregular art.

The first one who broke the barriers between the "official" and the Outsider art was Alfonso Ossorio in 1952, by exhibiting at the same time and without distinctions the works of Pollock and De Koonig alongside Brut artists. In Italy the Venice Biennial of 1984 exhibited works of Jon Serl, Howard Finster and of various artists of the Austrian Gugging studio. In 1992 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art showed the exceptional exhibition entitled "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art" which approached modern and contemporary official artists to Outsider artists in the attempt to illuminate the common stylistic and cultural connections. "Parallel Visions" hosted also some examples of artists like Jim Nutt and Christian Boltanski who after having been in contact with Outsider art never concealed the received influences.

The exhibition rendered evident the appropriation by part of the official art, of elements that seemed to be exclusive to Outsider art, like the obsessive repetition of figurative units, the reference to popular culture, the evocation of fantastic alternative truths or the use of discarded materials. The exhibition, moreover, gave visibility to the tendency in contemporary art to use poor and "low-culture" material.

The point of view of the organizers of the exhibition, Maurice Tuchman and Carol Eliel, is explained by the title of the exhibition, "Parallel Visions" (<http://www.gseart.com>). The title emphasizes the intention to compare two different artistic fields, but this intention perhaps is still more emphasized by the subtitle, "Modern Artists and Outsider Art", which demonstrates the dominant position of the official artists placed in the position of being able to decide which aspects of Outsider art to accept or to ignore. However, the exhibition had the merit to dispute the prevailing laws ruling the art system and to bring the problem of our relationship with the "other" and "diverse" to the surface (Galerie St. Etienne, 2006).

It should not surprise that the increasing economic interest of museums and galleries specialized in Outsider art has given life to the first Outsider Art Fair that since 1993 takes place each year in New York. Among the greatest galleries that annually attend the Fair we find the New Yorker Galerie St. Etienne whose founder, Otto Kallir, originally was interested only in the sale of German expressionist works. Today the gallery, which considers Outsider Art the natural development of "Expressionism",

exhibits only Outsider artists, like Darger and the Gugging artists. Another New Yorker gallery worthy of note is the Ricco/Maresca Gallery, emblematic for the evolution of the exposure of Outsider art. At the beginning of the eighties the gallery focused mainly on Folk artists, in the course of time it began to include also self-taught and Outsider artists and lately has begun to expose Outsider artists alongside "insider" artists (Rexer, 2003).

On the 27 January 2003 the auction house Christie's consecrated the field by organizing in New York the first public sale of 120 works of Outsider Art, coming from the collection of Robert M. Greenberg. The event resulted in 80% of sold art works and profits of \$ 1.146.603, marking a turning point in the deals of this kind of art and setting a bench mark for their market value (<http://www.christies.com>).

The entrance of Outsider art into the trade system outlines a new situation of an ambiguous nature. The ambiguity does not lie in the entrance into the art market by an artistic genre fundamentally uninterested in economic gains, a genre that has always remained outside the logics of profit, but in the fact that with becoming part of the commercial system, the prices at which Outsider Art is sold are still far below those that are achieved for the works of the modern and contemporary "classics" (Peiry, 2001).

In the last years also Italy has contributed to the process of acknowledging and appreciating the value of Outsider Art. The exhibitions "L'anormalità dell'arte" of 1993 in Milan, and "Figure dell'anima" of 1998 shown in Pavia and in Genoa, both organized by the art historian Bianca Tosatti, represent two other important stages in overcoming the barriers that have prevented irregular art to approach the world of the "official" art. The Milan exhibition and auction of 2003 "Outsider Art in Italy. Irregular art in the places of treatment", marked the gateway to a new field of Italian collectionism and presented itself as the launching pad for Italian Outsider art to conquer the international art market. Part of the exhibition included the "historical" Outsiders, artists considered "prototypes", like Zinelli, Sandri, Merati and Goldani; paradigmatic personalities whose characteristics and methods, as shown by Tosatti (2003), offer useful information to historians and critics for further research and study of the Outsider Art phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

This article describes the difficulties of art experts in finding consensus on a definition of Outsider Art. It shows also how the international art scene has promoted and increased the opportunities for the public to encoun-

ter and to appreciate Art Brut and Outsider Art via exhibitions and fairs. At the same time the growing interest in this art category, historically in a marginal position, has favoured the dissolution of former prejudices to which it was subjected. There is no doubt that the “protective” net of art history which ensures recognition and status includes now the Art Brut heritage. For this reason the urgency of art experts to categorize the production of living Outsider artists should be replaced by a more flexible and open minded attitude. It is possible today for Outsider artists to have their art work exposed and made visible to a great public, therefore to perceive their own resources and capacities and to become part of the art circuit. For an Outsider artist this implies among other risks the risk of being excluded from the Outsider category, arguably a risk worth taking.

What is important to keep in mind is that the label Outsider Art in no way guarantees the artists’ tutelage. Tutelage of their rights as artist and as person derives from the moral engagement of those who promote Outsider Art to never forget that they work with artists of much greater vulnerability, when compared to others.

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