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| Art brut is a term and phenomenon created by French artist and writer Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985); it refers to works of art created by artists who operate outside of culture or, more specifically, the art world and its institutions. Primarily a mid-twentieth century European phenomenon, Dubuffet sought a kind of art more radical than the avant-garde, which he thought had become increasingly homogenous and empty of invention. From his perspective, modern artists no longer provided a sufficient critique of culture, so his search for a new and revolutionary art led him to fringes of society. Art bruttranslates to ‘raw art,’ as Dubuffet viewed this kind of art to be ‘uncooked’ by culture. |
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As he stated, he looked for works which owed ‘nothing to the imitation of art that one can see in museums, salons, and galleries; works which the artist has entirely derived (invention and manner of expression) from his own sources, from his own impulses and humours, without regard for the rules, without regard for current convention.’ Art brutartists were often eccentric personalities, psychiatric patients, non-professional artists, and prisoners. Most importantly, these artists created works that aimed to express the maker’s pure, unmediated vision, without any knowledge or regard for previous traditions. Therefore, art brutcreations are not unified in terms of formal qualities or medium, but rather the status of the creator.  Jean Dubuffet first began formulating the concept of art brut in the summer of 1945, at the outset of his travels through Switzerland and France. Dubuffet was deeply impacted by the work of the Swiss psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1993), who collected works made by psychiatric patients. This act of collecting led Prinzhorn to write his most important text, *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* [*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*] in 1922. The text served as a starting point from which Dubuffet could begin conceptualizing art brut*.* It was during his trips that Dubuffet became acquainted with artists who would later become important characters to art brut, such as Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) and Alöise Corbaz (1886-1964), both Swiss.  File: London-North.pdf  Adolf Wölfli. *London-North*, 1911. Graphite and colored pencil on paper. Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland. [http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=showPic&lang=e&level=17&sublevel=0&id=129&parent\_id=43http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=showPic&lang=e&level=17&sublevel=0&id=129&parent\_id=43](http://www.adolfwoelfli.ch/index.php?c=showPic&lang=e&level=17&sublevel=0&id=129&parent_id=43)  He also formed important friendships with various figures who later became his collaborators and facilitators to his project. Dubuffet conducted most of his research from 1945-1947. He then returned to Paris and founded the Foyer de l’Art Brut in the basement of Galerie René Drouin*.* The gallerist and art dealer René Drouin, who was known at the time for mounting exhibitions of little known artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Georges Rouault, was the first person to exhibit works by art brut artists. In addition, Dubuffet wanted to publish a journal of his findings, *L’Art Brut*, but only one issue was ever printed, and it was never distributed. In 1948, he founded the more formal venture, the Compagnie de l’Art Brut, whose members included Surrealist André Breton and critic Michel Tapié. This non-profit organization was dedicated to the collection and display of art brut*.*  File: Joe Bousquet in Bed.pdf  Jean Dubuffet. *Joe Bousquet in Bed*, 1947. Oil emulsion and water on canvas, 57 5/8 x 44 7/8’ (146.3 x 114 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York; Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.  In 1951, the Compagnie de l’Art Brutmore or less dissolved, and art brutbecame primarily Dubuffet’s personal obsession. Over time, Dubuffet relaxed his initial definition of art brut*,* which stipulated that authentic artifacts must be made by creators completely isolated from outside cultural influences. Dubuffet realized that no person could be positioned completely outside of culture, nor were they impervious to the external world. In 1971, he donated his collection — around 5,000 objects, to the city of Lausanne, Switzerland. The collection was opened to the public in 1976 as the Collection de l’Art Brut at the Chateau de Beaulieu. The Collection remains at this location and is open to the public, serving as an important research center for the study and display of art brut.  Dubuffet’s writings and actions were often rife with contradiction. Though he searched for artists who had no formal training or institutional affiliation, his efforts to popularize them often resulted in appealing for institutional recognition. The establishment of the Compagnieand the Collectionresulted in the assimilation of art brutinto the very art world Dubuffet had fought against. In addition, art brut has been the focus of many exhibitions at esteemed art institutions, such as the Musée des Artes Décoratifs and the Palais de Tokyo, both in Paris. An additional political issue concerning art brut is that it — by virtue of it being an art movement — necessitates validation from an agent within the art world, such as Dubuffet. Art brut artists cannot be so self-aware that they recognize their production as art, because to do so would destroy the myth of authentic creation. Furthermore, art brut can be seen as one manifestation of the modernist project’s attempt to find the primitive or pure origins of art making. This desire to find the supposed authentic source of art necessitated searching for artists who were perceived as being devoid of culture, whether those artists were from so-called primitive societies, or whether they were marginalised or mentally ill characters living on the borders of civilization. The birth of art brut can also be understood as a response to, and rejection of, modernization and industrialization, as these artists often crafted objects by hand out of the most basic materials: rocks, shells, wood, even spit. As these artists seemed to retreat into themselves and away from the outside world, they could resist the normalizing pressures of modern society. Some of the most famous *art brut* artists include Gaston Chiassac (1910-1964, French), Madge Gill (1882-1961, British), and Heinrich Anton Müller (1865-1930, French).  File: Untitled.pdf  Madge Gill, *Untitled,* undated. dress embroidered with mercerized cotton thread and wool enriched with cotton voile, height 93 cm. *Collection de L’Art Brut*, Lausanne, Switzerland.  In 1972, the British art historian Roger Cardinal coined the term ‘outsider art’ as an English-language translation for art brut. Though initially seen as a translation or synonym, outsider art is phenomenon distinct from art brut, and thus it may be more appropriate to view art brut as its historical forbearer. Art brut set the precedent for the collection and exhibition of outsider art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which has now gained increasing popularity and sustains its own set of collectors, markets, and institutions. However, the boundaries between outsider art and art brut remain unclear, as many art brut artists are classified as outsiders and vice-versa. |
| Further reading:  (ABCD)  (Cardinal)  (Collection de l’Art Brut website)  (Dubuffet, Anticultural Positions)  (Dubuffet, Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings)  (Dubuffet Foundation website)  (Peiry)  (Prinzhorn)  (Thévoz) |