

Art Brut : a market for the disconnected

by Jeanne Calmont

In reaction to the formalism of expression encountered in society and against the engendered platonism of international abstract art, **Art Brut**, informal art or perhaps better considered as the « other art » made its presence felt in the art market of the mid 1940s during exhibitions dedicated to marginal artists displayed at the Galerie René Drouin (Paris), among whom figured the guardians of the method, Dubuffet and Fautrier (the highest grossing to this day).

An artist gifted with artistic conscience, **Jean Dubuffet** (1901-1985) found celebrity much more rapidly than Fautrier. Choosing neo-primitivism based on urban graffiti as his work, he produced sketches of children and the mentally-ill. The limited usage of materials in his pieces, made of monochromatic mud or impasto, met with early success, and was supported by Jean Paulhan in his informal painting review "Eloge." With works such as "Arab with a Shotgun" (oil on canvas, 1948) brought for, €903,518 at Sotheby's London and "The Hairdresser" (oil on canvas, circa 1950), sold for €682,080 at Christie's London, both in June 2009, current market prices certainly do not refute this success. The latest contemporary art sales in New York (on November 11 and 12, 2009) offered no less than 13 of the artist's pieces. While the work "Portrait of a Man in a Bowtie" issued from Paulhan's collection fetched a price of €556,893, the work "Trinité-Champs-Élysées" (oil on canvas, 1961) brought in a record of over 4 million Euros at Sotheby's. The numerous sketches and drawings done in black felt pen emanate from the period in which Dubuffet's pictorial writings became puzzle-like are being negotiated between 10,000 and 50,000 Euros.

After two works on paper flew up to €225,000 and €316,818 at Sotheby's (Paris/ London) in May and June 2009, in New York, "The Sorcerer" (ink and collage on paper) from Pierre Matisse's gallery (New York) sold for €92,885 at Sotheby's and "Situation XXXVII" (ink and collage on paper) for €15,694 and "Scenery from the window" (ink on paper) for €28,910 at Christie's. Among the monumental epoxy/ fiberglass/ polyurethane sculptures made between 1970 and 1985, two reached the price of €504,000 at Sotheby's New York in November 2008 and €305,000 at Christie's Paris in December 2008. More recently, during two days of auctions in New York (Sotheby's), the small "Arbration" was sold for €215,751 and the massive piece, "Clochepoche" for €699,457 (November 11, 2009).

The "Hostages" series, produced between 1943 and 1945, made from high quality pastes on an undetermined plastic background, assured the fame of Fautrier (1898-1964) at a time when informal tendencies began to appear in his work, and he claimed to be the originator of the process of applying paint in a raised pattern (over Dubuffet). Though such works are a rarity on the market, the more thematic still-lives are the least recognized works within his "picturesque" pieces, which are most properly described as "shapeless", and perhaps not even figurative, and which have sold for €120,000 and €145,000 at Christie's, Paris and Sotheby's, Paris in May of 2009. Of the fourteen sketches and watercolors put up for auction on November 3 at Artcurial (Paris), eleven were sold, all above their estimated value which was placed between 800 and 2,000 Euros. The bronze sculptures were appraised at approximately 10,000 – 20,000 Euros, with, as a reminder, a record brought in by the little pewter head, produced in the

Hostages series which sold for 150,000 Euros at Artcurial (Paris) in December of 2005.

Another figure who produced multi-form pieces in spite of the definition attributed by Dubuffet to his work “productions made by people totally devoid of any artistic culture,” **Gaston Chaissac** (1910-1964) was accepted early on into Dubuffet’s “Collection of Art Brut” before being placed into an “associated collection” by the originator of the movement. Though the removal of his works to a distinct category may be described as somewhat symptomatic of Art Brut’s tumultuous history within the history of art itself, it has no effect on the price of the artist’s works which are still among the most representative pieces in the movement. Among the paintings created (oil on canvas or cardboard) which are being negotiated prices between 10,000 – 30,000 Euros, it should be noted that the highest price attained by a painted wooden Large Door (1953): unsold in October 2007 at Cornette de Saint-Cyr (Paris), finally went for €175,000 in April 2008 at the same auction house. The prices for his sketches (watercolors, india ink, felt...) vary from 1,000 to approximately 15,000 Euros; this is the case for the “Visage Rose”, an open mouth on overlapping forms (1961) sold for €14,500 at Artcurial (Paris) in June 2009. On November 4th, at the same auction house, a painted poster dating from 1953 sold for €9,563, tripling its low-end appraisal value. The sculptures, more limited in production, are characterized by large, multicolor wooden totems whose prices vary from 30,000 to over 100,000 Euros as recorded at Perrin-Royère-Lajeunesse (Versailles) in April 2006 and at Sotheby’s Paris in May 2008.

The Swiss artist Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930) figures among the initial producers of Art Brut as defined by Dubuffet. Ravaged by delirium tremens and institutionalized as early as 1895, he combined sketches, watercolors, chalk and even colored pencil in his color intense compositions whose geometric density harkens indigenous Asian and native American murals and body painting. From a starting point of 10,000 Euros, the price for his work has reached up to 60,000 Euros as witnessed at Kornfeld (Berne) in June 2009.

Another Swiss artist, **Louis Soutter** (1871-1942) who was, due to his insanity, under close supervision by his uncle, Doctor Jeanneret, was also recognized by Dubuffet. From 1923 to 1942, his work can be divided into three periods: the “notebook” period, the “manneristic” period and the “finger painting” period. Though his work is rarely seen at auction, the medium in which he excelled was sketches in ink or lead pencil on paper, being either illustrations for books (such as for Le Corbusier, his cousin) or stand alone pages invaded by the obsessed, tortured and erotic female figure. Starting at several thousand Euros, these dense, well turned pages may sell for as high as €15,000; which was the case for the piece “Allein bin ich,” an ink composition characteristic of the artist’s “manneristic” period sold at Kornfeld (Berne) in June 2009.

Otto Wols (1913-1951), an early artist of a different genre, is considered to be a pioneer in the field of informal art. His style – essentially graphic – shows a strong relationship between the Art Brut movement and Surrealism, and more specifically the method of Surrealist Automatism. Having what may be described as the mental stability of a seismograph, he surrounded himself with artists from the movement lead by Breton who took part in (along with Dubuffet) the creation of the “Art Brut Company” (1948) in order to “gather, conserve and display works produced by the mentally unsound.” Displayed for the first time at the Drouin gallery in 1945,

his ink-enhanced watercolors sold for between 8,000 and 80,000 Euros, the highest price being obtained by a small 16.2 x 8.3 cm page that went for €143,478 at Christie's New York in November 2008. Though the oil paintings on canvas are indeed very rare in the auction houses, the black and white photos displayed as early as 1937 in the wake of Brassai, Kertész, Man Ray or even Bellmer, sell for (the higher quality prints) between 5,000 and 6,000 Euros as witnessed at Phillips de Purry & Co (New York) in April 2008.

During a monographic exposition of his paintings organized by the Drouin gallery in 1947, Wols teamed up with Georges Mathieu (born in 1921). The works from the man described as a founding father of Lyrical Abstraction, confirmed Art Brut/ Surrealism combination and foresaw the genesis of Tachisme. Squirted directly from the tube or crushed with the fingers, the colors of these "happenings" on canvas attract amateur attention at varying prices, from 2,000 to 310,000 Euros for "Théophanie" (1967) and €180,000 for "Songes Ecarlates" (1970) both sold at Sant' Agata Casa d' Aste (San Marino) in December 2008 and June 2009, respectively. Offered for sale at Ader (Paris) on November 13 and appraised between 60,000 and 80,000 Euros, an oil on canvas in which the yellow incandescent glyph rises above the scorched earth of Sienna, bears witness to the ancestral inspiration of the artist: a passage through Neolithic cave paintings from which he is able to achieve a degree of sophistication.

(see also Tajan (Paris) November 24, 2009)

Though Mathieu's work is fundamentally distinct from the simple-minded progenitors of Art Brut, (Séraphine de Senlis (1864-1942), Fleury Joseph Crépin (1875-1948), Augustin Lesage (1876-1954), Aloïse (1886-1964), Aristide Caillaud (1902-1990)... and two American painter-sketch artists, whose work sells for between 10,000 and 70,000 Euros, Bill Traylor (1854-1947) and Henry J. Darger (1892-1973) must be counted ...), his work does make a link between the North-American Tachisme/abstract artist: Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and his "dripping" style. Even though the post war years marked the establishment of American avant-gardism at a time during which gallery owner Pierre Matisse (New York) presented the work of Dubuffet and helped raise the asking price of his work; it should be noted that the Drouin gallery (Paris) displayed Pollack's work at the same time in close proximity with European Art Brut artists. It's to be noted that Pollack's work has more or less the same origins: abstract motifs of Native American works found on reservations. In spite of the fact that the most important works are currently found in the large public collections and that his paintings no longer have the success they once had in the auction houses (estimated between 180,000 – 250,000 dollars, a 33 x 14.5 cm poster from 1947 was bought-in on November 11 at Christie's, New York), the price for one of his works on paper is somewhere between 15,000 and 70,000 Euros. As such, it is noteworthy that a large 63,5 x 99.1 cm ink composition dated 1951 fetched €1,902,450 at Sotheby's, New York at the November 11, 2009 auction which should act to encourage (combined with the big sale of the day) professionals and collectors alike.

<http://artyparade.com/en/news/7>