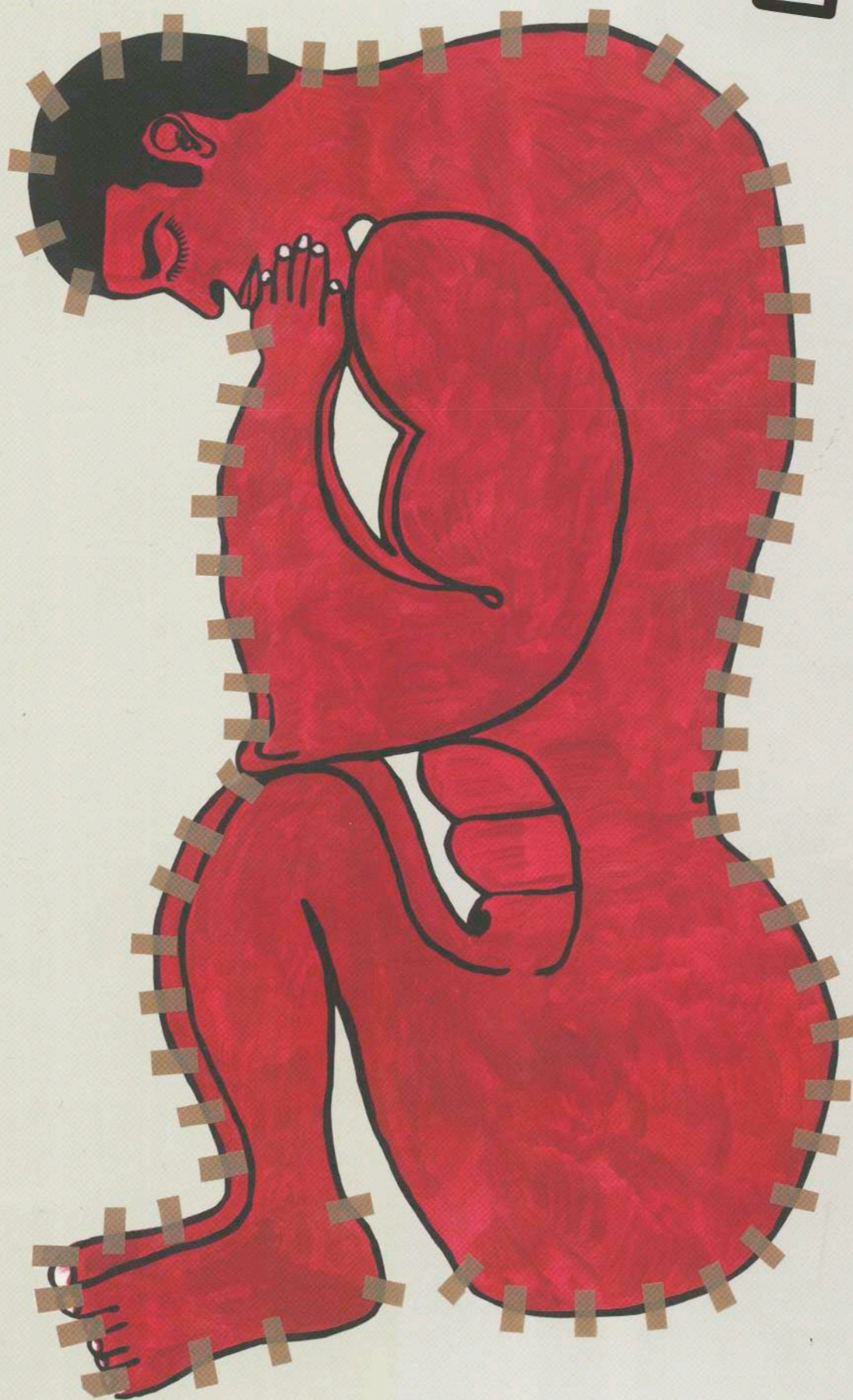


TREGER
SAINT SILVESTRE
COLLECTION

Art Brut

Umbigo°



Misleidys Francisca Castillo Pedroso



Richard Treger established the Richard Treger gallery in Paris, managing it for more than two decades. Together with António Saint Silvestre, he simultaneously assembled an art collection in which so-called “marginal” artists have major relevance. **Exhibition – *Portrait of the Soul* / p.11B**

Painter and sculptor **António Saint Silvestre** was involved in setting up and running Richard Treger’s art gallery and establishing the Treger Saint Silvestre Collection in tandem with his career as an artist. **Editorial and Exhibition – *Portrait of the Soul* / pp.2B/11B**



Marta Pina Marta Pina holds a degree in Art History from the NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities (FCSH), a postgraduate diploma in Visual Anthropology from the same institution, and an Advanced Photography Course from the Faculty of Design, Technology and Communication (IADE). She has studied and been developing projects and collaborations in different artistic and social fields over the years. She has collaborated with Millennium bcp - Banco Comercial Português as a Data Management Specialist, developing the inventory, cataloguing and data management of the Collection’s artworks, and was in charge of the Digital Inclusion Centre (CID) of the project *Tutores de Bairro - Programa Escolhas*. She is currently assistant to the Treger Saint Silvestre Art Brut Collection.



The gallery owner **Christian Berst** is also a collector, curator and theoretician. In the early 1990s, he specialised in contemporary Art Brut and opened *Objet Trouvé*, his first gallery, in Paris. As an Art Brut expert, Christian Berst collaborates with several museums. In 2012, Fundação Arpad Szenes-Vieira da Silva (Lisbon) commissioned *Arte Bruta – terra incógnita, Coleção Treger Saint Silvestre* with him. Together with business partner Daniel Klein, Christian Berst opened a second 300m² venue in New York in 2014. The two galleries took on the new name “Christian Berst Art Brut (Klein & Berst)”. In 2017, he was in charge of *Brut Now: art brut in the technological era*, a milestone exhibition in art history, the first to recognise and present digital art as a possible branch of Art Brut. **Essay – *The Art Brut Revolution* / p.28B**

Essay

The Art Brut Revolution

text: Christian Berst

Widely regarded as art's last *terra incognita*, Art Brut is still something people find disconcerting, and as such incontrovertibly divisive and even prone to fantasising. Its champions consider it the alpha and omega of the artistic urge, while detractors wish to ignore it out of sheer conformism.

These debates shouldn't lead us to overlook the fact that, simultaneously, more and more works in this area are finding their way into major international museum collections, and often serve as fodder for exhibition curators eager to jump off the beaten track.

Meanwhile, the Anglo-Saxon market is busy creating a label it calls *Outsider Art* – to the point where Christie's New York now even holds a sale on it every year.

In any case, the rising profile of, among others, the Treger-Saint Silvestre collection on the Iberian Peninsula's art scene is proof alone that a new chapter is now being written.

In the history of ideas, any intellectual or artistic project faces two formidable opponents: dogmatism and ignorance. They feed on each other, when not fuelled by laziness. This is also the case when, hoping to break away from a traditionally linear and orthodox – even canonical – approach to art history, we labour to break new ground in a field whose fertility this same history has yet to measure.

And so, as for Art Brut, the majority of our elites, focused on questioning the artistic process, usually seesaw between outright rejection and “diabolical stubbornness” – to quote Seneca – in their refusal to take this field seriously.

If anything, they console themselves by assigning it to a particular time in history, defined and circumscribed by the efforts of Jean Dubuffet, its “inventor”. A very convenient stance, as that fervent partisan suffered from dogmatism himself.

We must acknowledge Dubuffet’s unquestionable merit for having coined a unifying term – we are inclined to call it a crystallisation – between distinct artistic expressions that had previously been proscribed: “the art of the insane” or psychopathological art, but also mediumistic art, highly prized by the Surrealists and, finally, the art of the marginalised, of “exceptional” individuals devoted to obsessive artistic creation. All originating from outside the academy, but above all the market, all breaking *de facto* traditions and customs. All suddenly exalted by an ambivalent qualifier – “brut” – borrowed from mineralogy, stressing both their natural and precious quality.

He was wrong, however, in enacting a criterion based on autodidacticism and even a lack of culture, conditions that even a superficial inspection is enough to discredit, so heavily laced as they are with petty-bourgeois “Rousseauism”, harking back to an ancient legacy of colonial thinking on Black art, which was supposedly childish and uncultured.

Secondly, by enforcing – unfortunately with some success, if we are to judge by its persistence – an Art Brut iconography that resonated with Dubuffet’s own formal research. He was also responsible for instituting a simplified image of Art Brut, essentially reduced to figuration and the use of rudimentary means of creation, leading to a false perception that the works of Art Brut were almost exclusively a product of naïve or pop art.

Historical Art Brut collections offer countless examples of works from mental institutions bearing the seeds of the modern art revolution. Klee, Ernst, Picasso and many others were not wrong when they drew inspiration – as they did with primitive art – from this catalogue of innovative forms.

More than anything, Dubuffet pushed his neo-primitivism to the extent of forcibly conscripting these artists in a battle against so-called “cultural” art. A struggle that never was and never could have been theirs, but one that took part in, or at least contributed to, their ostracism.

Just as metaphysics cannot be perpetually restricted to the thinking of Aristotle, Art Brut must not be locked in Dubuffet’s ghetto, unless we resist changing paradigms.

By the same token, to criticise the concept of Art Brut only through 1940s “Dubuffetian” thinking is misguided for several reasons: primarily, it denies that he gradually freed himself from it over time. But it also denies the different ways of negotiating this territory that, throughout the last century, have crossed from Hans Prinzhorn to Harald Szeemann, from André Breton to Massimiliano Gioni, just to name a few.

Above all, it obscures an entire field of art born out of the social or mental otherness of its creators, who are impervious to the issues and circles of art, claiming neither the status of artist as we understand it, nor that their works should be considered art, so much so that their pieces are founded on individual mythologies and self-referential cosmogonies sometimes verging on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹.

This alone should warrant great consideration, as long as we are committed to seeing in them – through their disturbing oddness – an original, primordial creative impulse.

If we refute these “facts”, dismissing this phenomenological approach, we are always led to produce nothing more than a loose doxa underpinned by the unfortunately usual sloppiness in art history teaching. Naturally, cultural power, like all power, gathers its strength primarily from unwavering certainties. As Jean Rostand once said with dazzling alliteration: “certitude, servitude”

Nevertheless, what we are witnessing here is a lapse in thinking, an inability to go beyond a terminology – no matter how divisive and debatable – which does provide a remarkable foundation for re-evaluating art.

As a result, the term “brut”, when not serving as an alibi in order to ignore it, crystallises tensions more than providing a justification for them. The same people who continually use the epithet “contemporary” as an indispensable ingredient in their doctrine often believe that it would be sufficient to overlook the term “brut” to avoid meditating on the artistic endeavours this adjective sheds light on.

However, we cannot, lying by omission, gloss over the creative conditions of these works, the intimate processes that underlie them and the ontological dimension they reveal. Nor can we downplay these creators’ personalities and backgrounds, sometimes the only information that can shed light on their motivations and the extent of their achievements. It is undoubtedly better than the most brilliant exegesis or the most enticing para-text. If anything, the otherness in which these “anartists” operate should be reason enough for us to enquire about the precise nature of their creations.

What if attempting to define Art Brut ultimately means trying to pin down the unclassifiable, the unmeasurable, the imponderable, the infinite? All that designates, simultaneously, the unthought and the unthinkable. More precisely: what lies beyond reason.

What can be said of the recent inclusion of such works in our temples of culture – such as the 2013 and 2017 Venice Biennales, the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, the Centre Pompidou, the Maison Rouge and the Palais de Tokyo also in Paris, or even the Brooklyn Museum, MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum in New York? Apart from the fact that, in most cases, they happened without anyone knowing or worse, those works were imagined bearing the grotesque mask of *outsider* art, or the even more patronising *folk art*. There was nothing to allow the audience to learn their true essence.

Notwithstanding this, the passionate support of a growing number of art lovers and the efforts of a few tenacious thinkers, coupled with a new generation of curators and art historians, made it possible to affirm Art Brut as a major vector for “thinking about art” beyond well-known categories, eras, cultures and formal spectra.

Theories on this subject are now being questioned and debated with renewed vigour. Historical dogmas are being overcome and old rivalries are giving way to fruitful dia-

logue. We are now finding out that Art Brut is also present in photography, video, computer graphics and information technology. And its pulse is already noticeable in other more performative fields, such as music, dance and theatre.

Among other unexpected developments, including the fact that, in addition to an abstract Art Brut, these days widely documented, a conceptual Art Brut is not only conceivable – as in John Urho Kemp – but could also be its most remarkable and “essential” form of expression, considering that it would be the one least suspicious of a desire to seduce or solicit any kind of legitimisation. To this we could add, as noted by Raphaël Koenig, that “Prinzhorn considered, in contrast, any form of intention (attempt at composition, iconography, narrative dimension) as a sort of interference”.

By not succumbing to figurative or decorative inclinations, nor to spectacular fanfares, this part of Art Brut would attest to an art firmly rooted in the individual, an art without a home, with no clear addressee, where the *other*, *extime*², would be largely absent and, at best, facultative. The *other*, the intimate, would take up all the space.

But we could not confine our research to drawing up a catalogue of analogies based on the syntax of so-called contemporary art. The exercise would mainly involve freeing ourselves from normative preconceptions and simply recounting some of the most significant findings made in the field of Art Brut over the last few decades. Accepting, to some extent, that these may differ in nature from conventional art and, even more decisively, affirming their specificity by inscribing them – as we were able to do for non-Western art during the twentieth century – within the great continuum of art history.

By doing so, it dismantled a dichotomous and simplistic view of the world. Like that pitiful Anglo-Saxon notion of *Outsider Art*, which insidiously attempts to extend its dominance less through cultural imperialism than through economic imperialism. Acting as a label, more of a brand than a category, this outrageous invention is absolutely enslaved to the market, to the point where it has spread its dominance to virtually everything that is not *stricto sensu* in the category of contemporary art.

Despite having been conceptualised in 1972 by British art historian Roger Cardinal as a simple English-language equivalent of Art Brut, *Outsider Art* gradually became an instrument of domination, a Manichean one, whose chief yardstick is that its artists are self-taught, ignoring first and foremost the fact that many contemporary artists are also self-taught. Secondly, being self-taught in today's mass media era renders any illusion of being culturally virgin meaningless – if it ever made sense at all.

Not to mention that to define any field in opposition to contemporary art implies, as it did with Dubuffet in the 1950s, that this distinction must be visibly and convincingly expressed, pleasing the most reactionary fringe of commentators. Those same people who, in a cynical inversion of history, are prone to dismissing the achievements of today's visual artists as superficial, outdated and perverse. In a word, degenerate.

Ultimately, this idea of *Outsider Art* is regrettably grounded in the belief that art is made up of a centre – shall we call it “academic” – and a suburb –, which we may classify as “marginal”. This not only instils a hierarchy, but also gives credibility to the very notion that this art is located outside of it. This is unacceptable for multiple reasons: first, social,

it destroying any desire for inclusion or acceptance of otherness; second, philosophical, relegating to the margins an art whose strength is in escaping the constraints of representation and the market.

Finally, and over and above the territorial concerns, reflection on the issue of Art Brut urges us to consider both the means and the bridges. It incites us to reengage areas as explosive as the senses and the sacred, a convergence of the mythopoetic imagination and Romain Rolland's “oceanic feeling”, as well as the collective unconscious and its apex, the Jungian archetype.

All in all, as paradoxical as it may sound, perhaps we have not seen a more vibrant revival of the debate of art since the Duchampian revolution of a century ago. //

—
¹ Total work of art (according to the romantic conception).

² As opposed to “intime” (Translator's note)