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The joy of collecting (and some work and an obligation)

by Korine and Max E. Ammann

We are collecting Outsider Art and are very pleased to show our collection in Finland, in ITE-land! We know that there is also the French term Art Brut, or Raw Art, describing nearly the same as Outsider Art or ITE Art. According to a list published by Raw Vision some years ago, there are up to 50 terms or names for collecting what we call Outsider Art. All in all this is quite confusing when collecting this kind of art.

Before I come to the joy of collecting, the work involved and an obligation when collecting Outsider Art, as promised in the title of this presentation, I like to tell you how I came to art and to collecting in the mid-fifties and how my wife and I began to collect Outsider Art some 20 years ago.

I was born in the North Eastern part of Switzerland, in a small village on the lower part of the big Bodensee (Lake Constance), separating Germany and Switzerland. Zurich is 100 kilometres away, St. Gall 60 kilometres; in my youth much too far away for more than very rare visits. This meant no museums, concerts, theatre performances. Luckily my village on the lake was quite picturesque and attracted many painters. Three painters lived in the village and one of them became my mentor who introduced me to art and artists. My first work of art was a gift from the artist after I had done a favour to his son. At that time I was 18 years old.

Encouraged by the artist I began to collect art: first from him and his artist friends in the region and when I left my village, Swiss and international art. My first gallery purchases were in 1961 in Zurich. During my ten years as Foreign Correspondent in New York I met many artists. But the money was tight and there were only few purchases. After my return to Switzerland, in 1973 with my wife and two sons, the collecting interest was revived.

Twenty years later, our apartment filled with several thousand works of art our collecting changed. Two things happened approximately at the same time: in the art galleries, and especially at the Documenta in Kassel and the Biennale in Venice, which we visited regularly, there was less and less art we liked. Video art, installations and conceptual art did not appeal to us. On a chance visit to the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, I discovered that several artists exposed there were also in our collection – although not bought by us as Art Brut but rather because we liked the work. In a book which I purchased in the museum I read about two exhibition places in Paris and Bordeaux – cities I had to visit shortly.

In Paris, in the Halle Saint Pierre, I saw the celebrated exhibition “Art Brut et Compagnie” and in Bègles outside of Bordeaux, I met the Director of the Site de la Création Franche, Gérard Sendrey. At both places I was, in different ways, confronted with the confusion of labelling the art. In neither place I saw the term Art Brut although, obviously, the art presented was, all in all, the same as in Lausanne.

Gérard Sendrey told me that, early in the existence of his museum in Bègles, he had received a letter from the Director of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, forbidding him to call the work he exhibited Art Brut. Similar letters must have been sent by the creator of the Collection de l'Art Brut, Jean Dubuffet, or his

successor, Michel Thévoz, to other institutions in Europe, resulting in the present muddle of terms, names and labels. I never understood why the work of Adolf Wölfli is Art Brut in Lausanne, but must be called different in all other places.

I have always wondered about the claim of Dubuffet/Thévoz that the term Art Brut was protected. I have now a written confirmation by the Swiss Institute for intellectual property – the only authority that can provide such a protection as claimed by Dubuffet/Thévoz – that Art Brut is not protected in Switzerland, and never was.

Jean Dubuffet, the French painter, was certainly instrumental that his Art Brut – or our Outsider Art – came, in the years after World War Two, out of its obscurity. It might be safe to say that without Dubuffet's early interest we would not be sitting here. His dedication, stubbornness and determination were the basis for this ever growing interest into the art outside of the mainstream.

But Dubuffet was also an unpredictable man, some call him a hypocrite. Aside of his false claim of protection of Art Brut as a brand name, he also, with his rigid criteria, reduced Art Brut to a now dead curiosity. Dubuffet rejected such genuine "Art Brut" artists as Louis Soutter, Gaston Chaissac or Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern. To accommodate the rejects, he created an annex-category, the Neuve Invention, which, without criteria, has become a free for all before acceptance was halted. By denying his Art Brut artists the right of exposure, he contradicted his own position as artist. Dubuffet was known to push his own work.

If Dubuffet would not have put so many restrictions on Art Brut and if he would not have stopped a world-wide use of the term with the doubtful claim of protection, the term Art Brut for the art we talk about here might be the most suitable.

In this connection it is interesting to note that many specialists of Art Brut/Outsider Art claim how difficult a literal translation of Art Brut is. Art Brut translates as Raw Art. The magazine Raw Vision is clearly referring to Raw Art. Jean Dubuffet, coming originally from the wine business, would probably translated it differently. Dubuffet knew of Champagne Brut, which has nothing to do with raw champagne, but rather with pure champagne. Thus his English version – if he had looked for one – would have been pure art and not raw art.

Under the circumstances we feel that Outsider Art is the best and most comprehensive term. It must be said however, that for us Outsider Art is not the name for an art movement, such as Impressionism or Pop Art, but rather an umbrella description, useful to combine the many varieties we collect.

The name Outsider Art was created in 1972 when Roger Cardinal wrote in England a book about Art Brut. The publisher, rightly, questioned the attraction of a French title in the English market. Thus, probably in a brainstorming, the book-title Outsider Art was found. It is not clear who had the idea: Roger Cardinal or the publisher, nor was it ever cleared if Outsider Art and Art Brut are synonymous (as John MacGregor claims) or if Outsider Art is more comprehensive (as Roger Cardinal feels) or if Outsider Art covers all non mainstream output, as we believe.

The Americans were the first to use the term Outsider Art widely and especially the Outsider Fair in New York – held for the first time in 1992 – popularised it. But the Americans were also the first to question if the use of the term Outsider was politically correct. After all outsider can be a very negative denomination. I personally cannot see anything negative in the word outsider. Somebody once said that everybody is, at some stage and in some situation, an outsider.

A problem might be that the term Outsider Art reflects more the creator of the art than art itself. This is different from Art Brut which clearly concerns the art.

The Americans then started to promote the term self-taught – ignoring the fact that with self-taught only the creator is meant. Art cannot be self-taught. In this connection I remember a book written by an American, called Lyle Rexer, in which he presented some 20 artists. Half of them he described as outsiders, the other half as self-taught. It seems a silly attempt to create attention by mixing up the Outsider Art field even more.

When, in 1995/96, we got interested in Outsider Art and when soon thereafter we totally changed our collecting from mainstream to outsiders, we were not totally ignorant of our new interest. Living in Berne we knew of Adolf Wölfli. Already in the sixties I had seen an exhibition of Louis Soutter and we had heard of the artists from Gugging. We also had visited the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne and the Museum im Lagerhaus in St. Gall. We had seen exhibitions of Hans Krüsi, Carl Fredrik Hill and Heinrich-Anton Müller. Still it took some time before we had formed our vision of what Outsider Art was and then, how, what and in what form to collect.

We were lucky that soon after our first serious contacts with Outsider Art we met several persons who became instrumental in our collecting efforts. There was Geneviève Roulin, the assistant Director of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, who was extremely helpful in providing addresses, introductions and advice. In England I got to know Monika Kinley of the British Outsider Collection, in France Gérard Sendrey. Soon we met Jean-David Mermod and Philippe Eternod – the collectors from Lausanne, then Ans van Berkum in the Netherlands and one day I became member of the Board of the Museum im Lagerhaus in St. Gall.

This early, continuous and mostly close contact with what I call members of the outsider family, was essential in our collecting. The exchange of information, especially of new discoveries, is probably the most intensive with our collector friends. We also got to know many museum curators and art critics. Then there are the specialised galleries: there is only a limited number in Europe, but many in the United States.

Among our most enjoyable encounters when collecting are the visits to workshops. There are, in principle, two kinds: those connected to a psychiatric clinic, such as Gugging, La Tinaia, Kannen, Pommeriaie, Ramée or Waldau. Then we have independent social institutions, often founded and operated by a foundation, such as Créahm, Herenplaats, Kijkoor and, in the USA, NIAD and Creative Growth in California. Some of them we have visited dozens of times and have become friendly with both the artists and the caretakers.

It is interesting to see how different these workshops operate: in concept, structurally and financially. If I compare the two US ateliers mentioned above, I am fascinated how in one the caretakers get involved in the art-making, while in the other they only look for order and supply the artists with the necessary

material. In one of the Belgian ateliers, the caretaker rules with iron hand, while in the other there is a relaxed companionship between the caretakers and the artists.

All these workshops have between 15 and 25 artists working, mostly drawing and painting, but also producing ceramics. Not all are great artists, although one senses a creative satisfaction in all of them. A few are creating real great art.

When I talk about the outsider family I am perfectly aware that not all are helpful. Obviously my interest in an artist I like to visit and purchase art from him or her, does not correspond with the interest of a gallery wishing to represent this artist. But the contacts within the “outsider family” are essential in finding new artists or additional works.

I remember how I discovered Martine Copenaut, who has become one of our favoured artists. When visiting the Collection de l’Art Brut I saw a fascinating colour pencil drawing. I noted the name of the artist and the home town: Neufvilles, Belgium. I contacted the Art en Marge gallery in Brussels. The Director did not react to the artist’s name, only to the town: Neufvilles, with its atelier Ramée. I called the atelier and indeed Martine Copenaut worked there. When visiting the atelier I met her, a woman with Down Syndrome. When approaching to watch her drawing she looked at me suspiciously. On consequent visits she became friendly, and on probably our sixth or eighth visit, she greeted me with a hug.

At one of our visits to Ramée, the caretaker, Yves Poelman, showed us works of a newcomer, a young and extremely polite son of a diplomat, André Prues. We were immediately taken by his drawings and he has become a mainstay in our collection.

South of Zurich we got to know Hansruedi Meier, a retired school teacher, who has become a discoverer of new talents. One of them is Jakob Morf who lived in a retirement home in Rafz. Hansruedi saw some of Morf’s drawings in the corridor of the home and told Simone Schaufelberger of the Lagerhaus and me. I told Eternod/Mermod and collector Jean-Paul Longchamp who, in return, told the Collection de l’Art Brut. When Jakob Morf died, the remaining works, around 1500 A 4 sheets, were equally allocated to the Lagerhaus and us. Of our 750 works we distributed over 500 for free to interested museums, such as Villeneuve d’Ascq or Bègles, and to private collectors.

A recent addition to our collection is Emil Medardus, a true social outsider from Zurich who died some 15 years ago. His daughter wanted to get rid of the 250 works left by her father and contacted Markus Landert, the Director of the Kartause Museum. Markus asked me to get in touch with the daughter. When visiting her, we made an inventory of the works and, after some contemplating, distributed the 250 works in equal parts among three museums and three private collectors.

Without really separating our collection into sub-categories it can be said that the following four groups form our collection:

- Mentally handicapped and mentally ill persons
- Visionaries, mediumistics, religious
- Naïve and memory painters including the farmer naives from Switzerland
- Social outsiders

Still, we do not collect labels but rather what we like, what pleases us, what touches us, what interests us.

To look at our collection from a different angle we could separate as follows:

- The classics, such as Wölfli, Aloise, Soutter, Schröder-Sonnenstern, Madge Gill, Scottie Wilson

The classics to be. Artists who had their first exposure in the eighties and early nineties, such as Theo, Helmut, André Robillard or Benjamin Bonjour

New discoveries, such as Martine Copenaut, Yves Fleury, Wim de Jong or Evert Panis.

An important aspect is certainly our wish to collect globally. In more than a dozen trips to the USA, my wife and I visited artists in the Four Corners region and in Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, Maryland, Virginia and, of course, New York. In Australia we went to the Blue Mountains to visit Anthony Mannix and some other outsiders. In Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia we met the autistic boy/artist Clement Ooi.

In all of the above the question arises: what do you collect? Why this artist? What are your criteria for choosing? We principally collect what we like. If there is an important artist whose work does not appeal to us we might buy one work as sort of reference piece. It is unavoidable that the “feeling good” when visiting an artist or an atelier also plays a role. Martha Grunenwaldt, Jaber, André Robillard, Imppu Salminen, Petri Martikainen or Alpo Koivumäki we have visited or met up to a dozen times. We like their art, but also our meetings were a delight. Once an artist has entered our collection, we try to add to it, to have at least three to six works by him or her. From some artists we have many more works in our collection.

In addition to buying directly at the artist or in a workshop we also have bought in galleries: in New York, Paris, Zurich or Vienna. Some major pieces were on sale in auctions, such as Christies and Sotheby's in New York. Especially in the United States, with probably over 1000 Folk Art collectors, whole estates are regular put on the block. We have in our collection works which were before in the celebrated collections of Sterling Strauser and of Robert Greenberg.

When I was asked several months ago to propose a title of my presentation, I chose:

The joy of collecting (and some work and an obligation)

I hope I have given you some inside of our joy. A lot of the joy results from meeting the artists. We are collectors who want to meet the artist – of the over 500 artists in our collection we met over 300 of them. In fact there are not many living artists in our collection we have not met. But joy also comes from meeting other collectors, museum curators, workshop caretakers, gallerists, art critics or the many who simply love art. Then there are the visits to the visionary environments such, as in Finland, the garden of Rönkkönen.

The joy of collecting certainly overwhelms the work which it involves: To pay the purchases may not be work, but it can be painful. Bigger works have to be packed and then the best way to transport has to be found.

When travelling in the USA we realised our disadvantage against an American collector. He comes with a pick-up truck, loads and drives home. Even if we also would drive around in a pick-up truck – at the airport our happiness would end there. To send the work by airfreight would probably cost – considering the packing – more than the art work! We remember a visit to the Dean Jensen Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The gallerist offered us a great painting on metal by Mary T. Smith at a reasonable price. I measured the work. It was 73 cm long – my big suitcase was only 71 cm. No Mary T. Smith in our collection!

Once home, the art has to be registered and photographed and then properly stored. When works are requested for an exhibition, you have to select the work. It may become heart breaking when you select artists for the exhibition and have to leave out one who is close to your heart.

I believe that a collector has the obligation to share. Even considering the danger of damage or loss when lending, it seems important to be ready to share your work. Over the years works from our collection were presented in well over 50 exhibitions, all over the world.

In closing my presentation I have an answer to a question:

- Is it right to keep Outsider Art separate from mainstream art or should there be not a separate category?

There have been, in the past decades, some major exhibitions with both outsider and mainstream art together. I recall “Parallel Visions” which I saw in Tokyo; then an exhibition in Basle of Louis Soutter together with some mainstream classics such as Picasso or Matisse. And there was the exhibition of works by Dubuffet and of Art Brut in Düsseldorf ten years ago. In all cases the outsiders did well and could keep up with the mainstream – certainly Dubuffet’s 100 works in Düsseldorf had a hard time against the 100 works by outsider classics.

The answer to the question might be that the best of Outsider Art should be incorporated into mainstream exhibitions, but that, for a majority of the outsiders, separate exhibition possibilities have to be available.