

Lecture



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Presentation of Outsider Art today – a Critique

Since the 1970ies, Outsider Art has seen a remarkable upswing in the art world. The creation of the term through Roger Cardinal's 1972 book of the same title¹ was already part of this growing interest. This publication had the aim of explaining to an Anglophone audience (of possible collectors) the term of "Art Brut", which the French artist Jean Dubuffet had developed from 1945 onwards in opposition to "cultural art", which he despised. Just shortly before this, Phyllis Kind was one of the first American art dealers to include artists who weren't considered to produce "Art Brut" in her program.² Like the French term, "Outsider Art" was supposed to describe art that is beyond established forms. "Outsider" in this case points to the artworks, not to the creators.

Since then many gallerists and collectors have turned their attention to this field of art; in Europe and the US, museums have been dedicated to it, the first one being the Collection de l'art brut in Lausanne in 1976; in 1992, the yearly Outsider Art Fair in New York was established, which now has a European offshoot in Paris that began some years ago. More and more popular as well as academic literature is being published on the phenomenon, too. Since the 1970ies there have also been specialized displays at museums and venues. An increasing number of artworks of this kind have been shown at bigger exhibitions since 1972, when the documenta 5 for the first time integrated "artistry of the mentally ill". Recently, even museums for modern and contemporary art have started to collect Outsider Art.

It is therefore about time to take a critical look at how this form of art is presented in exhibitions. Exhibiting Outsider Art confronts with unique challenges which apparently curators are not always able to cope with. Because of limited space, I can only highlight some few examples though.

Naturally, Jean Dubuffet was the first to show Art Brut, beginning in 1947 in the basement of René Drouin's gallery in Paris. A 1948 photograph shows this Foyer d'art brut (Fig. 1), with a part of Dubuffet's collection massed across the walls and on the floor. Some of the works had been framed, others just been put on

the walls with sticky tape, some rest on their own raffia mat. The captions were written by hand and cursory. With this Dubuffet consciously evaded the usual presentation of “cultural” art, where pictures have their own assigned place and are hung on the walls in a frame and sculptures are put on a pedestal, accompanied by individual, printed signs. Instead his exhibition reminds one of the space-filling placement of pictures and sculptures in collections of psychiatrists, such as Auguste Marie (1865-1934).

For the Collection de l’art brut Dubuffet modified this expression of opposition against “cultural” art. The works were not placed as densely anymore, but still closer to each other than in other exhibitions. Additionally, most of them were now framed or put in glass cabinets. Captions were still thrifty, but executed more professionally. The most important reform though, which is still in place today, is the color of the walls. Instead of in a White Cube, which had established itself for modern art in the 1920ies, in Lausanne, one experiences the works in a Black Cube. Without a doubt this brings out the colors of the works. But at the same time black reminds one of ethnographic collections.

Dubuffet was undoubtedly aware that the form of exhibition influenced the perception of the works. By avoiding the usual form of presentation in art museums, he wanted to underline the difference of Art brut from “cultural art”. But the alternatives he chose weighed upon the exhibits with other problematic connotations. In 1949, he turned against the association of Art Brut with mental illness in his famous manifesto “L’art brut préféré aux arts culturelles”.³ And the association of non-European cultures with what was to him the essential art of his own society could have hardly been in his sense either.

Today, museums which almost exclusively collect art from the area of Art Brut/ Outsider Art (such as the Centre for Outsider Art in Gugging, the Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore and the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg) have developed very different modes of presentation, which ideally take into account the specific characteristics of the exhibits. But I would like to focus here on exhibitions of Art Brut/Outsider Art in other museums and venues where the exhibits are approached from a “cultural” standpoint, so to speak. These initiatives should



Fig.1



Fig.2

be welcomed, as they can ban the danger of ghettoization of “art at the outskirts of art” (Michel Thevoz). A long-term ideal could be the inclusion of Art Brut/Outsider Art into the art world, in the sense of a relaxed appreciation of its characteristics as equal to those of other forms of art. But taking a look at four examples shows that we are still far away from achieving this ideal. Against it stand two tendencies, which I would like to describe as normalization and exoticization.

The former can be illustrated by a presentation of newly acquired photographs by Miroslaw Tichý (1926-2011) at the Frankfurt Museum for Modern Art in 2011. For years, Tichý obsessively portrayed women in his small czech hometown.⁴ He used self-made cameras, cut the paper for the black and white prints and also developed the photos himself. As he did this rather sloppily, most pictures turned out blurry, with crooked angles, wavy and blotchy. That obviously did not bother him. Most of the pictures he just stored in cardboard boxes anyway, never to look at them again. Only some of his photos received an own passepartout made from paper, which he decorated with colorful lines and ornaments. Tichý’s photos thus live an existence between object and picture and a sensitive presentation should take this into consideration. But how were these works treated at the Museum for Modern Art in Frankfurt? The works were given standard passepartouts and uniform museum frames, even those that had already been mounted by Tichý (Fig. 2). This seems to say: if you are to enter these honorable halls, you have to wear tails, if necessary over your other clothes. The curator probably did not choose this form of presentation because he meant to protect the institution from the dirt and faultiness of Outsider Art, but because he thoughtlessly treated these works the same as all photographs that are shown in this museum. The works are even lent to other venues in this form, for example to the Essen Folkwang Museum for the show *The Shadow of the Avant-Garde* (2015/16).⁵ Evidently, the curators of this exhibition too failed to see the problem.

Another example of careless conventional presentation methods was the first exhibition of the series “secret universe” at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin,

curated by Claudia Dichter and Udo Kittelmann, in 2011. Exhibited was the late work of graphic designer Horst Ademeit (1937-2010), which he had not regarded as art for a long time, but as documentation: it consists of thousands of Polaroid photos, with which he wanted to prove the effects of “cold rays”, for him responsible for many evils in the world.⁶ The instant photos show details of Ademeit’s environment in Cologne that seem unsuspecting to uninvolved people; on the frames he noted information on the conditions under which the Polaroids were produced and the meaning of the recorded data. At the entrance of the Berlin show, some pictures were laid out for closer examination and explained. The main room, however, contained large tableaus of uniformly arranged examples of the series (Fig. 3). Here it was undoubtedly intended to illustrate the sheer quantity in an aesthetically appealing way. But the form of presentation chosen is known from exhibitions of minimalist or conceptual art, thereby blurring the boundaries to those art movements at the expense of differentiation. Accustomed to such tableaus, the visitors hardly bothered to decipher the individual captions on the frames, apart from the fact that the lower rows were only legible with difficulty and those at the top impossible to read. Ademeit’s work became an art-wallpaper. He himself had never been concerned with an aesthetic larger picture of his Polaroids, but with the individual photos, their informative value and their role as pieces of evidence. The challenge of presenting his photographs is to make this visible without prematurely aestheticising it in known forms. The viewer should not be spared the trouble of having to process a multitude of pictures to learn something about Ademeit’s agonizing documentation, which took him several years to complete.

The two aforementioned examples show thoughtless equalization as the problem. Differences are being evened out in favor of the established norms, and Outsider Art is thus being colonized in a sense. The two following examples will make clear that there is – still – in art business a tendency to discriminate against Outsider Art.

The exhibition “World Transformers” (Schirn, Frankfurt am Main, 2010) presented works by 13 classic Outsider Artists who had each been given their own

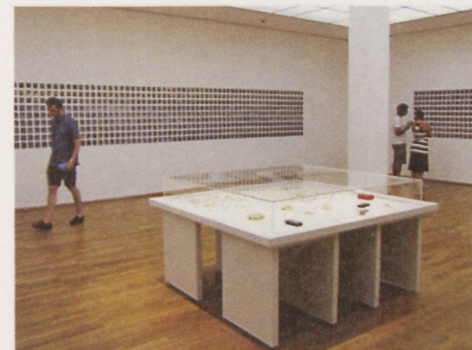


Fig.3



Fig.4

architectural space with different dimensions and colors ranging between blue and grey, to accentuate their individuality (Fig. 4). In the aisle on one side of the elongated gallery, through which the positions could be paced off, biographical data was affixed, while explanations to the works were missing. Thus, the artists presented in the exhibition were reduced to their life story, mostly characterized by misfortune, illness and suffering. And their works had to be understood by the visitor solely as the expression of this. The show was based on a misunderstanding of the term Outsider Art as an art of social outsiders. Despite its worthy form of presentation, “World Transformers” was therefore not far away from being a freak show. What the exhibition missed out to do was to embed the art in the relevant social and artistic movements which otherwise is common practice for exhibitions.

An even more glaring example of exclusion by exoticism was shown by the exhibition “Avatar and Atavism” (2015) at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.⁷ The show was about the reappearance of grotesque human heads and bodies in art since the 1980s. The mostly large-format paintings, sculptures and installations came from well-established artists and ranged from Georg Baselitz to Jonathan Meese and Eva Kotatkova. In addition, the curator Veit Loers and his assistant Pia Witzmann had selected works on paper from one Italian and three German open studios (namely Kunsthaus Kannen from Münster, Kunstpraxis Soest and MALzeitler from Duisburg) for mentally handicapped people and people with mental problems. These works also showed bodies and heads. The idea was to include ‘primordial’ artistic expressions, and to make a comparison. At first, the comparative works were even to be placed in an anteroom to the actual exhibition. After protests by the German studios, Loers placed them on four mustard colored walls forming two corners, which faced away from the rest of the exhibition (on white Walls) (Fig. 5). The presentation was different in other regards too. The paper works were placed close to and on top of each other and instead of individual object captions only two lists with the names of the authors were attached to opposing pillars. The impression of a two-class exhibition was irrefutable.

The mode of presentation in Düsseldorf 2015 was strikingly similar to that of

Dubuffet in 1948. But unlike back then it was not the expression of an opposition to “cultural art”, but rather a declassifying dissociation from it. At least, this treatment of the works of studio artists makes visible, what sort of almost fear-inducing peculiarities are still being perceived in Outsider Art in general. Perhaps even the curators of the other three exhibitions mentioned were trying to fight a similar feeling of unsettledness. Hopefully in the future, the art world will learn a more relaxed handling of Outsider Art and understand its special features as the exciting challenge it is, which in the end can only refresh ways of curating art in general.

1 Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, London 1972.

2 Edward M. Gómez, „For Outsider Art, the End of an Era“, in: *Raw Vision* 68, Winter 2009/2010, pp. 32-38.

3 Jean Dubuffet, „Art Brut in Preference to the Cultural Arts“(1949), in: *ibid. Malerei in der Falle. Antikulturelle Positionen*, ed. by Andreas Franzke, Bern and Berlin 1991, pp. 86-94.

4 See *Die Stadt der Frauen*. Miroslav Tichý, ed. by Alfred Wiczorek and Thomas Schirmböck, exhibition catalogue, ZEPHYR, Reiss-Engelhorn-Museen Mannheim, Heidelberg 2013.

5 See *Schatten der Avantgarde. Rousseau und die vergessenen Maler*, ed. by Kaspar König and Falk Wolf, exhibition catalogue, Folkwang Museum Essen, Ostfildern 2015.

6 See *Horst Ademeit - secret universe*, ed. by Claudia Dichter und Udo Kittelmann, exhibition catalogue, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Köln 2011.

7 See *Avatar und Atavismus. Outside der Avantgarde*, ed. by Veit Loers and Gregor Jansen, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Heidelberg and Berlin 2015.



Fig.5