OUTSIDER ART

From the Margins to the Marketplace

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Adolf Wölfli, 'The Soolimann Butterflies and the Quince Tree', 1911, pencil and colour pencil on paper.

Introduction

I'll build you a city of tatters, I will!
Without plan or cement I'll build you
An edifice that you shan't destroy,
And that a sort of frothing blatancy,
Will keep up and inflate, that will come and
latch onto your nose,
And the frozen nose of all your Parthenons,
your Arabian arts and your Mings.
Henri Michaux, *La Nuit remue*

The term 'Outsider Art' refers, in a very open-ended way, to extraordinary works created by people who are in some way on the margins of society, and who, for whatever mixture of reasons, find themselves unable to fit into the conventional requirements – social and psychological, as well as artistic – of the culture they inhabit. What makes this work extraordinary is the fact that it is created by people who have no training and who are so far removed from 'normal' expectations that they may not even think of themselves as 'artists', let alone as 'Outsiders'. It is us who find their work remarkable, firstly because it seems to have no precedents in the art world with which we are familiar, and secondly because they seem to have none of the usual motives for making art (once summed up by Freud as 'fame, money and the love of women'). More than this, many partisans of Outsider Art believe that it is more powerful, more exciting and more original than mainstream art, whether Modernist or contemporary. Certainly the amount of such work that has been discovered over the past fifty years is impressive, as well as bewildering in its variety. But what began as a radical antithesis to accepted forms of art cannot go on forever being 'outside' the culture from which it once claimed to be independent: despite initial scepticism or hostility, Outsider Art is gradually being assimilated. Exhibitions and publications devoted to it multiply, galleries and museums acquire it, and it has also undoubtedly influenced many contemporary artists: so the gap that once

separated it from the art world has narrowed. Inevitably this raises questions about its future, some of which this book tries to address.

The term 'Outsider Art' itself hasn't come out of nowhere: in all its many and various forms, it has been the subject of enthusiasm and controversy for more than thirty years, since it was first coined by Roger Cardinal.[1] In fact his picture of a radical form of creativity that lies outside education and culture is a version of something that dates back to the late 1940s, when the artist Jean Dubuffet came up with the notion of *Art Brut*: an art that was direct, innocent, even crude (*brut* means raw or unsweetened) and quite contrary to the oversophistication of conventional culture. Dubuffet's writings, and the collection he began to build up after the Second World War, together amounted to a frontal assault on the false standards of the established art world. In his typically polemical style, Dubuffet even attacked iconic figures of modern art such as Van Gogh: it's perhaps fair to say that it was the cult of the Great Artist and the consequent exaggeration of the work's freedom from convention that drew his ire. It was, on the contrary, the opposite – work created by people so obscure and humble that they did not even think of themselves as artists – that first attracted him. It is perhaps an unavoidable paradox that his collection is now housed in a handsome museum in Lausanne, and that what began as a challenge has now acquired its own authority in the field.

Art Brut can be seen as the continuation and intensification of a widespread and typical feature of Modernism: the quest for new and original forms of creativity in areas considered immune from conventional culture, such as Child Art, Primitive Art and the art of the insane. Children had not yet been educated, tribal artists knew nothing of European art traditions and madmen were presumed to have been catapulted out of conformity by their psychosis. Artworks or artefacts that came from these areas that seemed to be 'outside' the established positions of official culture were seen as evidence for the existence of a fundamental creative impulse that had been overlaid by the sophistications of civilization. In relation to the latter, there was much emphasis in Futurist and Dadaist manifestos on the necessity to sweep away

the old order and to replace it with something fresher and more vigorous. But it was in Surrealism that alternative forms of creativity – naif art, eccentric art and the art of madmen – was most systematically promoted, and to some extent *Art Brut* can be seen as competing for this territory.

Yet by mid-century many of the aggressive innovations of Modernism had begun to be incorporated in the very mainstream they had sought to escape from. In addition, the experience of the real devastation caused by the Second World War conjured up the image of a civilization reduced to ruins and having to make do with the most basic necessities. This was the climate in which Existentialism flourished and there was an interest in the artistically 'informal', meaning indeterminate images in which the aesthetic and the material were forcefully welded together.[2] It's likely this also influenced the emergence of *Art Brut*, so that when Dubuffet set out in July 1945 to search for the 'raw' material that was to form the basis for his collection, he was almost literally retrieving it from the ruins of civilization: certainly in the case of psychiatric hospitals he was often rescuing work from physical destruction.

This quest for 'original' forms of creativity also has a longer history, going back to the post-Renaissance emergence of the artist as an individual expressive figure and indeed the notion of genius itself: this brought with it a cluster of ideas and fantasies about how originality and self-expression are embodied in works of art. In many ways these ideas acted as a foil to the social and professional demands made on artists through patronage, and later, the commercial market in artworks. The image of the artist as a lonely and misunderstood figure, whose creativity pushes at the boundaries of normality, was reinforced by the eighteenth-century Romantic cult of the artist as a visionary whose way of experiencing might be so extraordinary as to border on a 'madness' that was already beginning to be identified with mental 'illness'. This connection between extreme forms of originality and other ways of being beyond the pale of conventional society is something that is reversed in *Art Brut*, and subsequently in Outsider Art, in so far as being socially or psychologically 'outside' becomes almost a precondition for authentic creativity.

More specifically, it is because they have little or no training in the skills of art, often using whatever materials are to hand, that the work that Outsiders, or the creators of *Art Brut*, produce is supposed to be so strikingly original and inventive. As Dubuffet put it in a famous passage:

> We understand by this works made by people free from all artistic culture, in whom imitation, contrary to what happens with intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their makers draw everything (subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of writing, etc) from their own accounts and don't borrow from the schemas of either classical or fashionable art. Here we witness the artistic process quite pure, raw, reinvented by its author in the entirety of its stages, starting off with only his own impulses.[3]

This is rather a tall order, and while the work of many *Art Brut* artists does seem to have a strikingly original look and feel to it, it isn't always quite as private or removed from the rest of the world as it appears to be. But Dubuffet's prescription lays great stress on the solitary and uncompromisingly subjective nature of authentic creativity, as opposed to the conformism to be found in the 'cultural art' found in museums, galleries and salons. Hence many of the supposedly positive institutions of society – schools, art schools and academies – actually inculcate a false version of creativity, whereas certain kinds of 'negative' institution, prisons and mental hospitals in particular, that house people excluded from the rest of society, can inadvertently act as incubators for a more subversive and authentic version of it. In fact, more than half Dubuffet's original collection came from such sources.

Because Outsiders often live in circumstances of extreme isolation, or else may be castaways in some institution, there is inevitably an association with psychological peculiarity, if not with a certified disorder or disability. This link between creativity and eccentricity or abnormality has also been a thread in the history of post-Renaissance art, and it binds the inherent 'originality' of the work itself to the peculiar life circumstances of its creator, or at least

to the story or legend supposedly based on them. In the case of Outsider Art, no matter how extraordinary or original the work itself may be, the story behind it is intimately involved in establishing its authenticity. We need some evidence that its creator really was insulated in one way or another from the culture they were born into, and their story, even if it consists only of a few bare facts (in the case of old-fashioned psychiatric institutions: date of admission, diagnosis, date of death) provides a basis for this. In a very literal way institutionalization seems the most obvious guarantee that someone is 'outside' society: this originally applied to old-fashioned psychiatric confinement and is increasingly the case in the current search for Outsider Art in special studios set up for disabled or mentally ill people.

However, there are plenty of other ways of living an eccentric or marginal life, but for obvious reasons reclusive individuals are often hard to track down. Their work, especially when it consists of environments, is also extremely vulnerable to damage or destruction once they have lost control of it. Of course much the same is true for any artist who fails to get recognition during their lifetime, but in the case of Outsiders there is something like a built-in fragility or precariousness both to them and to their work. By the same token, we are intrigued by their peculiarity and their apparent difference from us: a difference that ranges from genial obstinacy to the most extreme forms of withdrawal or non-communication, as in severe autism, for example. The mixture of the extraordinary with the baffling or secretive that characterizes Outsider Art suggests something on the edge of intelligibility and seems to offer us pictures of mental states that we can barely imagine, though the exact nature of the connection between the two is a problematic one. But here too there is a relation to the wider world of art, and to our interest in what could be called the psychological image of an artist (Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock are obvious examples). This is intensified in the case of Outsiders because of the exceptional and isolated situation of their creativity, in which there is rarely any direct testimony from the individual concerned: we wonder what triggered it off and how it managed to survive against so many obstacles.

Ferdinand Cheval, *Palais Idéal*, 1879–1912, Hauterive, Drôme. Cheval's palace draws on encyclopaedic images of world architecture, as well as morphing between mineral, vegetable and human forms.

The range of Outsider work is remarkable, varying in scale from tiny, microcosmic scraps to major undertakings: it includes drawings, paintings, sculptures, assemblages, environments and even entire buildings (for example Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Idéal or Simon Rodia's Watts Towers). To begin with, Dubuffet's *Art Brut* collection was modest in size, partly because of problems in housing and transporting it, and partly because his initial attraction was often to humble and unassuming works that were awkward, if not downright clumsy, utterly anti-intellectual and hence the antithesis of sophisticated cultural art. Superficially it resembled the heterogeneous collections that were assembled by turn-of-the-century psychiatrists such as Lombroso, Ladame and Morgenthaler; but one of the purposes of his collection was a quite contrary one: to free these works from any association with psychopathology and to recognize them instead as examples of uncompromisingly individual forms of creativity.

In the course of his researches, conducted mainly in France and Switzerland, but later including Germany, Italy and, most importantly, America, he also encountered more substantial bodies of work, such as those of the psychotic artists Adolf Wölfli and Aloïse Corbaz, which had been created over several decades and consisted of thousands of pieces, rivalling the work of professional artists in scale and ambition, but still utterly different and seemingly having a completely autonomous character. In many cases it seems as if the *Art Brut* or Outsider artist suddenly starts elaborating their work without any preliminary sketches or trials, as if they had found their voice as soon as they started singing. Whereas the careers of conventional artists show progressive shifts of style, and maybe a restless ambition to keep on 'making it new', Outsider Art is often marked by a constant returning to the same motifs and an intense elaboration of them. This is what gives it the feel of being driven by some invisible compulsion, or of being coloured by motives that might be secret or perverse: something that is at once fascinating and baffling for the spectator.

The idea of the artist being driven to create, or acting out of what Kandinsky called 'inner necessity', is something we are familiar with from the

history of modern art, and it belongs to the same set of post-Renaissance preconceptions about the nature of artistic creativity that I have already referred to. In the context of *Art Brut* it often leads to the assumption that the artist is expressing something uniquely subversive and individualistic; yet at the same time their work is often seen as being governed by instinctual or automatic processes of which they are not conscious and over which they have little or no control. This issue figures prominently in psychiatric accounts of so-called 'psychotic art', yet from an *Art Brut* perspective such work is seen as powerfully and individually expressive. This apparent contradiction is aggravated by the fact that many of these artists were either unable or unwilling to offer any comment on their work. These issues also have something in common with the phenomena associated with absent-minded 'doodling' and other, more extensive, forms of supposedly automatic drawing, such as those inspired by Spiritualist beliefs, which constitutes a significant element in *Art Brut*.

Dubuffet's collection, and the numerous articles and monographs that he published as it expanded, set the very stringent criteria by which work could be considered to be *Art Brut*: utter originality in form and content, and the social or psychological isolation of its creator. But as the number of collectors, dealers and enthusiasts has increased, and as other collections, exhibitions and publications have followed in the wake of *Art Brut*, these criteria have become increasingly difficult to apply, partly because more artists are being discovered during their lifetime and it is becoming harder to avoid some kind of self-consciousness about being labelled 'Outsider'. This term encompasses a wider range than *Art Brut*, and it includes an expanding proliferation of terms, such as self-taught art, visionary art, contemporary folk art and the like. The increasing commercialization of the field also creates its own pressures to discover new hidden talents. In the end, as we look at the way in which what began as the intensely concentrated distillation of *Art Brut* has expanded and been diffused, the question must arise how much further this can go before its essential characteristics have been diluted. No doubt strange and uncategorizable work will continue to be discovered, but we have

Carlo Zinelli, *Untitled*, *c.* 1968, poster paint on paper, 68.2 x 48.5 cm. The thousands of images painted by Zinelli have an enigmatic vocabulary of repeated silhouettes and fragments of language whose meanings we can only guess at.

to ask ourselves what real difference calling it 'Outsider Art' now makes.

The spectrum of Outsider Art is now so broad that it is hard to find any obvious common feature, except that it is something that strikes us as extraordinary, both in its choice of materials – Outsiders have a penchant for recycling what has been discarded – and in its content – often an unsettling combination of the crude and innocent – and that it seems to have been created out of the blue. There are works that have some kind of figurative or narrative threads, even if we cannot easily grasp them; other works seem to be obscurely diagrammatic, or else to have been invaded by 'ornamental' motifs that compete with or threaten to eclipse these threads; whilst others seem completely abstract, but in ways that do not readily fit into what we usually associate with that term. Often the sheer intensity and multiplicity of idioms (graphic, figurative, symbolic, ornamental or even musical, geographic, calendrical or architectural) feels overwhelming. In fact the experience of going round an exhibition of Outsider Art is often strangely exhausting: so many microcosms to penetrate, so much intense secrecy to trespass into. I shall explore these variations within Outsider Art later, but first I want to ask: to what extent do we look at Outsider Art in a different way from other art?

Imagine a situation where you come across, in a junk stall or second-hand shop, a drawing or painting that strikes you as being odd enough to consider calling it 'Outsider': are there intrinsic qualities or criteria to justify this? You might say that it has to have a striking level of originality, that it doesn't seem derivative or self-conscious, that it has a peculiar intensity, perhaps even an obsessional or solipsistic feel to it, that it hits a nerve in you

somewhere that other art doesn't, and so on. But these are all second-order judgements: perhaps there are qualities that are more directly connected with the work itself; such as its awkward facture, its use of second-hand materials, its utter insouciance about correct ways of drawing, the sense of it being densely crammed with competing motifs, or stuck in a compulsive formal repetition. Perhaps the work in question doesn't exist on its own, it might be in a folder along with other work by the same artist: so then you could begin to get a sense of a body of work with its own idiom or stylistic consistency, and this might reinforce your sense of it being somehow out of the ordinary.

You would certainly begin to imagine who had made this work, how or why they had made it, and under what circumstances. We do this with all art, but usually there is some sort of biographical or art-historical context that helps to shape, if it doesn't actually determine, our response, whereas here there is just the work on its own. It is a characteristic of Outsider Art that it seems to exist in isolation, so that, even though there may be collaged or assembled material with a date, there are not often any obvious references to other artists or works of art. In this case the lack of contextual clues reinforces your feeling that this is something 'out of the blue', created in some kind of cultural vacuum, that it smacks of extreme solitude, of someone turned in on themselves, drawing on some private or idiosyncratic reservoir. Many of these responses are, of course, to do with the fact that you may already have some idea of what Outsider Art is, and of the kind of people who create it. All the more reason for you to get excited by the level of eccentric creativity displayed, by the unselfconscious aesthetic qualities of the work and by its powerful psychological impact.

These links between 'aesthetic' qualities – by which I mean the actual material handling of the medium, across the full range, even when it is clumsy or crude, and there seems no attempt to try and please the spectator – and a range of psychological responses on our part that include fascination, surprise and even shock, are not confined to the world of Outsider Art: they are inextricably involved in our response to all art.[4] But because Outsider Art

involves qualities that are in several senses 'on the edge', it provokes these reactions to an unusual extent. If a work has a sufficiently bizarre or extraordinary look to it, then it is bound to have a correspondingly striking psychological impact on us, even if we are not fully conscious of it. This effect is amplified when we know something about the peculiar circumstances behind its creation.

Nevertheless, some collectors of Outsider Art claim that it is the creativity displayed in the work itself that is their main focus of interest, rather than its psychological resonances, or the story behind it. In that case, the work should be shown without any information about its creator, so that nothing about its background should interfere with its artistic impact. However, I don't think anybody has yet put this claim to the test by exhibiting Outsider and non-Outsider work together without any accompanying information (although in 2006 Carine Fol, the director of Art En Marge did mount a show called '20+20' in which works by Outsider artists were exhibited alongside works by artists in various Belgian museums with no indication as to which was which). However, to go back to the situation where you're confronted by something that looks and feels like it could be an Outsider work, there is always the wish to come across some supporting evidence, however meagre, in order to authenticate its Outsider status. I would say that only in exceptional cases can the work stand on its own without this support.

In any case, even if we know nothing about the artist's history, we still tend to imagine what lies behind or at the bottom of a work of art, and to connect this to the artist who made it. To begin with, this happens at the level of what could be called a vicarious kinetic identification with the way in which the work might have been made: something that takes place almost involuntarily, whether we are practising artists ourselves or not. When we look at the handling or brushwork in a painting, especially where it is conspicuous and dramatic (in a Soutine, or a de Kooning, for example), we cannot help subconsciously re-enacting the process whereby these marks were made. It doesn't really matter whether what we imagine corresponds to what actually went on in the artist's studio: what we are engaged in is an

imaginative inhabitation of the work, which is surely one of the reasons we are interested in art in the first place. So the fact that in many cases we know nothing about how, or indeed why, an Outsider made their work doesn't disqualify this: in fact it intensifies it.

But now suppose that somehow we stumble across some background information about the person who created the work we have just discovered, even if it is only the stamp of a psychiatric hospital. Suddenly a whole new dimension is added to it: we start to imagine the situation within which this person worked, their state of mind, their motives (or lack of them), the external or internal obstacles they had to overcome, and so forth. Again, this applies particularly to Outsiders, because we are fascinated by how someone could manage to survive, let alone be creative, in conditions of near total isolation. Here again the imaginary picture of creativity mentioned earlier comes into play, in so far as Outsider Art seems to present us with limit cases, where creativity springs forth without any outward encouragement or support, and hence in its least adulterated form.

Sometimes the background information is actually quite extensive: some Outsiders have left us all sorts of statements and messages. These are nearly always an intrinsic part of their work (as in the case of Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Idéal, or Henry Darger's *In the Realms of the Unreal*, for example). Again, such material can be found in many other kinds of art, but there is usually something suitably odd and intriguing about it in this context. The baffling or riddling effect of, for example, Adolf Wölfli's vast epic and cosmic autobiography, *From the Cradle to the Grave*, contributes to the sense that such work, even when it appears to be addressed to an audience, has an intractable dimension of secrecy to it. But these are not 'private worlds' in any straightforward sense, for they contain recognizable references to the outside world (even collaged advertisements in Wölfli's case); indeed they re-present the familiar imagery of the world we know in strange, fantastic form.

Now the fictitious example I've just given, with all the thrill of discovering something in the wild, is rare these days. When Dubuffet

Adolf Wölfli, *Urugual=Schetterlinge under der Kaiser=Äpfel mit Blühten. Sprechende Organe*, 1911, colour and colour crayon on newsprint, 49.8 x 37.6 cm. Wölfli's pictures combine verbal, ornamental, musical and pictographic ingredients in highly organized compositions in which memory and fantasy images are fused.

first started prospecting for *Art Brut*, he was making forays into an unknown territory, one that he could shape and patrol himself. Even those pioneer collectors following in his wake, such as Victor Musgrave, whose collection now forms part of the Musgrave Kinley Outsider Archive, used to trawl Salvation Army hostels enquiring after anyone who made strange drawings or other objects that might be recognized as Outsider. Today, a collector is more likely to acquire Outsider Art through the established network of dealers and galleries, including those connected with various institutions for people with disabilities or psychiatric problems, such as the Rotterdam Herenplaats studio or the 'House of Artists' at Gugging in Austria. This is an inevitable consequence of the accelerating commercialization of the field and it brings with it a shifting of responsibility from freelance individuals to more vested interests with a greater power to set the standards and promote work that is sometimes of dubious value. Nevertheless, besides the obviously financial interests involved, the field of Outsider Art is still infused with a fascination with the image, perhaps even the mirage, of an authentic artistic creativity uncontaminated by any previous acquaintance with the art world.

A good illustration of the kinds of contradictions brought up by this notion of an original uncultivated creativity is the story of Marla Olmstead, a four-year-old American girl whose paintings are promoted as being on a par with the work of adult Abstract Expressionist artists. I am not going to consider the question of how far her work was really her own, or was influenced by her parents and others, though this is an issue that also affects some Outsider artists. What interests me here is the paradoxical combination of a fascination with children's spontaneous artistic creativity with a precocious quasi-adult level of achievement. In Olmstead's case the relation to mainstream abstract art cuts two ways. Either the work of adult abstract artists is no better than hers – ' a child could do it', but then hardly any children except Olmstead actually do – or her paintings in some extra-ordinary way have the same qualities – confidence of scale, informality of handling, freedom of invention and daring colour combination, for example – and can therefore stand alongside the work of more experienced adults.

In the latter case, if the quality of the work is all that matters, what difference does it make to how we look at it if the work was supposedly made by a four-year-old who is unable and unwilling even to describe how she went about it?

In a bizarre short cut, the promotion of Olmstead's work jumps from the inspiration many modern artists have found in the spontaneity and innocence of child art to the resulting adult artwork. The scale of Olmstead's work and her apparent commitment to it make our attitude to her work differ from the way we might approach a normal child's painting, so it cannot really be seen as 'child art'; yet the fact that we know it has been painted by a four-year-old makes it equally difficult to see it as on a par with adult abstraction. For the same reasons her work cannot be called 'Outsider', because it is presented as equivalent to gallery-oriented abstract art. Instead, we have to consider that the 'artistry' involved might be as much our creation as hers. These are issues we will return to when we deal with work created by adults who supposedly have the mental age of a child.

These discussions about the origin and nature of artistic creativity carry their own cargo of concepts, such as 'originality', 'automatism', 'madness' and 'authenticity', many of which I shall try to re-examine. Whilst Outsider Art seems to be the epitome of creativity in its most unfettered forms, even its title embodies fundamental contradictions: how can something be 'art' and yet somehow originate from 'outside' culture? Of course there is something seductive about the idea that, rather than having the monopoly on artistic creativity, 'culture', with all its apparatus of schools, academies, galleries, publications and exhibitions, actually inhibits or distorts it; but that can make it all the harder to alter or abandon this notion. In any case, many 'professional' artists (Miró or Picasso, for example) have found their own ways of shedding or counteracting their training. In addition, there is a predatory relationship between mainstream culture and those phenomena that seem to lie outside, or on the edge of, its grasp: this is most evident in the commercial exploitation of Outsiders, but it is implicit in other forms of cultural assimilation. Outsiders are a bit like a species that once inhabited the wild, was then declared an endangered species, and as a result was rescued

Gaston Chaissac, *Mme Cruche*, 1947, pencil and indian ink on paper, 50 x 65 cm. Chaissac's feelings about his marginal status were painfully contradictory; but there are certainly playful pastiches of Modernist idioms in some of his work.

and decanted into safari parks or zoos, but that may now have to face the alternative of dying in captivity or being hunted to extinction.

Dubuffet's Collection de l'Art Brut, which was as much his invention as his discovery, enjoyed the halcyon days after the end of the Second World War, when such free-range creativity was still almost unrecognized and sources for it were still unadulterated. At the same time as it began to be exposed to public attention, these springs were already starting to dry up – the nature of psychotic art was being affected by more sophisticated anti-psychotic medication, for example – and some artists who were at first included, most notoriously Gaston Chaissac, showed signs of being too aware of their potential *Art Brut* status to be considered authentic. Although Dubuffet's enterprise cannot be held solely responsible for all these changes, some kind of feedback loop certainly did evolve between *Art Brut* and the world at large, and this has intensified with the emergence of Outsider Art in its wake.

Outsider Art is more than half a century old now, and there can be no denying that it is being gradually assimilated into the culture from which it claims to stand apart. One result of this is that some of these artists have become too self-conscious to be called Outsiders without question.

It is not just that it is getting harder and harder to identify authentic Outsiders; it is also true that numerous forms of ersatz Outsider Art are being promoted, both within the field and from the wider culture surrounding it. Outsider Art has also become a reference point for many artists, who use and abuse it after their own fashion, just like any other cultural material available to them. In addition, the title itself risks becoming so generalized and expanded that it simply functions as an ill-defined term of approval. Perhaps this is a sign that the differences that once marked *Art Brut* out as distinct from mainstream art have gradually eroded and become more debatable. In the end, we are left with the question: has Outsider Art become just another category within the history of art, and if so, should its use be confined to what could be called the 'classic' work – dating from the first half of the twentieth century, say – or if not, what purposes are served by going on using it?

Even this brief survey has raised a number of other questions: just what is it that makes an artwork 'original' or 'extraordinary'? What is, in social or in psychological terms, 'normal'? If Outsider Art is so private and eccentric, how do people ever come across it? By what standards is work judged to be genuine Outsider Art, and who decides on them? What happens to Outsider artists when their work begins to be recognized and appreciated by others? Is Outsider Art something like a natural phenomenon, bursting out from some hidden wellspring of creativity that is potentially available to everyone; or is it, on the contrary, the exception that proves the rule that artistic creativity is in various ways not 'normal'? Might it be to some extent a kind of wishful projection on the part of mainstream culture, desperate to escape from its own sophistication? How does our involvement with Outsider Art affect us? How long can the category itself survive, once it becomes incorporated into the wider culture? Is the very notion of a radically individualistic and anti-social

creativity something with its own cultural shelf life? These are some of the issues that the essays in this book will try to address.

This book does not set out to provide a comprehensive overview of all the varieties of Outsider Art, or of any of its relatives, such as 'self-taught art', 'visionary art', 'contemporary folk art' and the like: there are plenty of such surveys, some of which are listed in the Bibliography. It also deals almost entirely with two-dimensional work, because many of the phenomena I am concerned with occur most obviously in that form. Instead it is prompted by a number of questions that I began asking myself when I first started working in this field more then twenty years ago. Some of these questions have answers, others do not; but they all need to be asked. It may seem that most of the problems I try to address apply exclusively to Outsider Art, and that might be part of its claim to be a law unto itself; but because it embodies a cluster of ideas about the true nature of artistic creativity that has a longer history than the polemical slant of *Art Brut* suggests, and because it brings up many of the problematic notions that I've just mentioned, it functions as a lens through which issues relevant to the wider world of art can be seen as if under magnification. Like some other writers in the field,[5] I believe that, however exciting or challenging it may be, Outsider Art is not, and cannot be, 'outside' culture (any more than the exoticism projected onto 'Primitive Art' was). Nevertheless, although I am critical of many of its unspoken assumptions, I remain fascinated by much of the work itself, and by the stories of those who created it.

1
Art Brut and the Search for the Source of Creative Originality

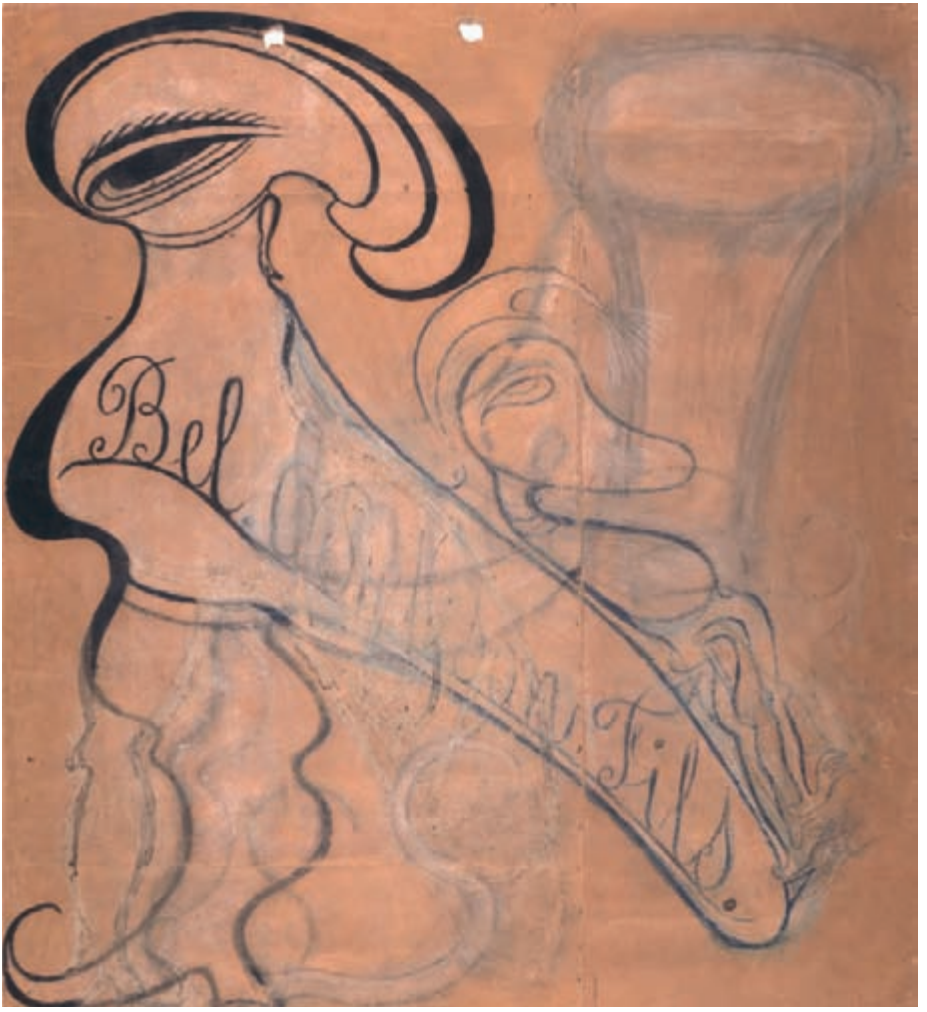
Since it was first introduced, 'Outsider Art' has become an acknowledged term of reference in the world of galleries and museums, even if people outside those domains are not always sure what to make of it. This is partly because the work it identifies is inherently difficult to digest – after all, it is supposed to collide with our expectations about art – but it is also because its remit is rather elastic, compared with that of *Art Brut*. To start with, it referred to work that had been created before the term was coined, that was in retrospect deemed to be sufficiently original and unsolicited to warrant being seen as 'outside' the conventional framework of art; but it also set up a template for what might be thought to qualify as genuine Outsider Art in future. In this respect it is more like 'Primitive Art' than a recognized art movement such as Impressionism, in that while it is a category that has been invented by some members of the art world, it is applied to a variety of work made by people who may not have chosen to be labelled as such. On the one hand it seems to refer to something that already exists – an unsolicited, free-range creativity that is something like a natural given, waiting to be discovered – and on the other hand it plays an active part in establishing that very creativity. As we shall see, this image of a wild or uncultivated form of creativity plays a key role both in Outsider Art and in its precursor, Art Brut, and in fact links them to the very culture from which they claim to be independent.

So 'Outsider Art' refers not only to an ever expanding collection of strange and eccentric work, but to a cluster of ideas or fantasies about a fundamental and original mode of creativity and to a set of prescribed circumstances under which this is to be found in its most authentic forms. There is perhaps more of a parallel here with movements such as Expressionism or

Surrealism, in which similarly controversial assertions about creativity were made, and where work that could never have aspired to those titles, because it had been created prior to them, was adopted retrospectively because it seemed to fit them. In the case of Outsider Art, both the work and the people who created it have in effect been roped into a reservation that we have constructed for them, and which serves our purposes more than theirs.[1] In this chapter I want to give a brief account of the origins of *Art Brut*, and its relationship to Outsider Art, and to show what are the underlying images of creativity that inspired them. It turns out that these images have their own previous history in European culture, within which they function as collective constructions. One could even call these 'myths', not because they are false, but because they inform how we think about things like self-expression and originality in art and because they are in a sense self-fulfilling rather than open to proof. Outsider Art can be seen as the latest incarnation of these myths, perhaps carrying them to their logical conclusion. The history of Outsider Art has been extensively covered,[2] and so I shall only go over it briefly here; but along the way I shall point out some of the underlying assumptions that are involved, and how they have evolved.

We have already seen that behind the current concept of Outsider Art lies Jean Dubuffet's notion of '*Art Brut*'. He embarked on a series of prospecting expeditions searching out and acquiring, by gift or purchase, works that seemed to have been created without any external encouragement and which, even if they were often modest in scale, had a striking and unprecedented quality to them. In 1947 he found a space in the basement of Réné Drouin's Parisian gallery that became the Foyer de l'Art Brut. Although the space was small, a series of exhibitions introduced the Parisian public to the work of the psychotic artists Wölfli, Aloïse, Tripier, Müller and Gaston Duf, the spiritualist work of Crépin, as well as uncategorizable work by Jura and Gironella. Exhibiting these works was itself a controversial move, but from the start he envisaged a series of publications presenting this material, which at first included Oceanic carvings and Swiss carnival masks as well as works from psychiatric hospitals and elsewhere, in a more

Aloïse Corbaz, *Liberté et Patrie*, *c*. 1958–60, coloured pencil on paper, 102 x 72 cm. Aloïse's work has a remarkable extravagance and flow, and her romantic couples are given lavish treatment, in which parts of bodies and clothing are in similar voluptuous idioms.



Heinrich-Anton Müller, *Bel. Os et son Fils*, *c*. 1917/1922, chalk, ink and graphite on cardboard, 79.5 x 71.5 cm. Müller was reported to have taken extraordinary pleasure in inventing images that were as bizarre as he could make them.

permanent form; but soon his focus concentrated on the work of autodidacts, eccentrics and other creators who seemed outside cultural norms, but were not officially 'mad'.

Dubuffet saw himself as a kind of ambassador for these unknown artists: 'At the end of the day I believe that the real discoverer of a Wölfli's or an Aloïse's art is none other than Mr Wölfli or Miss Aloïse themselves, and that competitions between people who put themselves forward as having been the first to recognize them are tedious.'[3] In 1948 the Compagnie de l'Art Brut was founded and given legal status, including André Breton among its founder members. At this point *Art Brut* was something only known about and appreciated by a small number of enthusiasts, but both Dubuffet's collection and public interest in it were to grow steadily over the next thirty years. *Art Brut* can now be said to have its own tradition based on a canon of authentic works, including well-known artists like Wölfli, Aloïse and Lesage, and hence to have acquired a certain status and authority.

Although Dubuffet was understandably to shift his position over time, *Art Brut* started life as a vigorously polemical assertion, backed up by the work that he accumulated in his collection: that of a popular, unsophisticated creativity that is beyond, or in some way more fundamental than, the versions of it to be found in our schools, academies and galleries. As he put it:

> I am well persuaded that in every human being there is an immense stock of mental creations and interpretations of the highest possible value, and much more than is necessary to evoke in the artistic domain a body of work of immense scope . . . I do not believe the notions, commonly held nevertheless, according to which only a few men, marked out by fate, would have the privilege of an internal world worth the trouble to externalize.[4]

This is a democratic, almost universal, image of creativity, and it sits uneasily with the more defiantly anti-social aspect of *Art Brut* that he also highlighted:

> If the so-called 'gifts' attributed to 'artists' are, in our view, very widely distributed, rare on the other hand, extremely rare, are those who take the risk of exercising them in full purity and licence, and who free themselves for that from social conditioning – or at least keep a safe distance from it. We must note that this liberation implies an asocial disposition, a stance that sociologists call alienated [*aliéné*]. Nevertheless it is this disposition that seems to us the mainspring of all creation and discovery – the innovator being essentially someone who is not content with what others are content with, and thus takes up a contestatory position.[5]

It's significant that the double meaning of the French *aliéné* refers both to someone who refuses to conform (a rebel) and to someone who is unable to (a madman). Certainly Dubuffet was inclined to identify the two, but the question as to what extent this exclusion is the consequence of choice or fate, found already existing or made retrospectively by us, is one that will crop up again when I deal with so-called 'psychotic art', which formed more than half his original collection.

Over the next thirty years this expanded (in 1963 it amounted to more than two thousand items, by 1966 to five),[6] and shifted locations from Europe to America and back again. Its exile in America was partly prompted by Dubuffet's anger at the indifference or hostility shown by the French cultural establishment, and it also signalled the break-up of the Compagnie de l'Art Brut and its connections with Parisian intellectuals, especially Breton and the Surrealists. On the collection's return to Europe in 1962, a second Compagnie was set up and Dubuffet, the success of whose own work had made him better off, set about acquiring new artists. Some of these, such as Laure Pigeon, Raphael Lonné and Madge Gill, were mediumistic; others, such as Wölfli or Carlo Zinelli, were classic examples of 'psychotic art', and others were less categorizable.

In the early 1960s a series of publications, the Cahiers de l'Art Brut, began to appear under his direction. Dubuffet wanted the presentation of

Raphael Lonné, *Untitled*, 1951, pencil on paper, 24 x 31.5 cm. Lonné's early drawings, done in the evening after work, conjure up microcosms like Cheval's, in which there is an elision between rocks, plants and faces and the textures from which they emerge.

each artist to be as documentary as possible, ideally letting the artist speak for his or her self, with no attempt to interpret or analyse their work. The work in his collection was not for sale, although a few works were sold in the early years, and he did not allow it to be lent out, thus confirming its distance from the conventional cultural world. Nevertheless he was anxious to find a larger and more permanent home for it, and eventually in 1976 the collection was housed in the Château de Beaulieu in Lausanne, where it is now presented as a kind of anti-museum. As *Art Brut* became better known, other collectors have followed in Dubuffet's wake: the creative role of such collecting is something I shall deal with in the next chapter; but the Collection de l'Art

Brut now has a definitive status and authority that differs from the rather eclectic criteria applied to Outsider Art. For the moment I want to focus on his claim that such work exemplified an unsophisticated and radical form of creativity that owed nothing to established cultural expectations.

In fact Dubuffet's concept of *Art Brut*, despite its claim to be anti-cultural, fits into the history of an increasing preoccupation in the early decades of the twentieth century with sources of untaught creativity that are not burdened by the dead weight of artistic tradition and conventions. The idea that natural, unsolicited forms of creativity existed that were more spontaneous and genuine than those that were so painstakingly cultivated in the training of artists was a seductive one to many of the pioneers of Modern Art, such as Klee, Picasso or Miró, and they sought out and accumulated objects, from obscure artworks to found objects or anonymous artefacts, that seemed to embody it. Early Modernist movements (Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism in particular) intensified this search, and an interest developed in the art of the supposedly untutored (child art, folk art and primitive art), or the deviant (art by criminals or the insane) as demonstrating that exciting forms of creativity could be found that owed little or nothing to technical or professional standards. Dubuffet himself amassed a considerable collection of children's art before embarking on his collection of *Art Brut*. Indeed the recognition and collection of such work was just as creative and controversial as was the creation of the avant-garde art that was inspired by it. Artists, particularly in Expressionism and Surrealism, were also fascinated by the psychological and social alienation that might have been responsible for these extraordinary works, and by the resulting intensity of their expression, and sometimes christened them 'Expressionist' or 'Surrealist' in retrospect.

This free-range creativity seemed to combine artistic originality with the expression of an exceptional individuality and, besides the work of auto-didacts, 'psychotic art' appeared to show this in its most extreme forms. Even though collections of psychiatric art had begun to attract interest in the early years of the twentieth century, it was the publication of Hans Prinzhorn's ground-breaking work *Bildnerei der Geisteskranken* (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*)

in 1922 that inspired a number of avant-garde artists (such as Kubin, Ernst, Klee and Dalí) with its astonishing range of illustrations, even if they could not always read the German text. These included the work of psychotic artists such as Adolf Wölfli, Heinrich-Anton Müller, Peter Moog, Franz Bühler and August Natterer. Prinzhorn himself claimed, in a statement that could equally well have been applied to many of the creators of *Art Brut*, that 'The configurative process, instinctive and free of purpose, breaks through in these people without any demonstrable stimulus or direction – they know not what they do.'[7] Despite the impression given by Dubuffet that he was a pioneer in rediscovering this material (he visited the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg in 1950, but was not much impressed by it), the notion was already current in Paris between the wars that such work, with its focus on inspiration and intensity of expression rather than on technical skill, offered an exciting alternative to traditional and academic art.[8] Dubuffet's invention of the concept of '*Art Brut*' is clearly a more systematized version of the interest in this phenomenon, and it constructed an alternative vision of a creativity that was essentially outside official culture.

Hence what we are faced with in *Art Brut*, and subsequently in Outsider Art, is not just a heterogeneous collection of bizarre and 'original' works of art or artefacts, but behind them a cluster of ideas and theories about the true nature of creativity, where it is to be found in its purest forms and its relation to the established apparatus of artistic conventions. If I call these 'myths', it is certainly not to disparage them, but rather to indicate that fantasies, assumptions and images often precede the intellectual arguments that are constructed on their basis. *Art Brut* appears to refer to a body of extraordinary work that already exists, and indeed it is part of its trademark that the work in question has been created in advance of and in utter ignorance of the label. However, these works are treated as evidence of a radical creativity, the profile of which was being built up at the same time as they were being discovered. In other words, there is a kind of circularity involved, between the discovery of the works that came to constitute the Collection de l'Art Brut and the pronouncements about authentic creativity that validated them. This means

that we cannot simply consider the evolution of *Art Brut* in purely art-historical terms, but must take into account the myths of creativity that are embodied in it. These myths surface at particular moments in European culture – the years immediately after the first and Second World Wars – and reflect, as well as contribute to, cultural crises that can be seen as a response to contemporary political, economic and social events.

However, this does not mean that these myths of creativity do not have quite a long history. In fact it is one that goes a lot further back than Modernism, as far back as the post-Renaissance cult of melancholy and the Saturnine temperament, and the concurrent interest in the artist as an individual and exceptional figure.[9] Elements of this cultural construction include: the idea that the artist's vocation is marked by special signs (as in Leonardo's autobiography); a fascination with the peculiar and eccentric details of their life (as in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*); an intense curiosity about the creative process itself (witness the growing market for sketches); the assumption that invention is linked to self-expression (the ascription to artists of *pazzia* or *furor*), and a belief in the extraordinary power of images (supported by neo-Platonic philosophy). Versions of all of these features figure in the myth of 'raw' creativity promoted by Dubuffet's *Art Brut* and subsequently elaborated in the concept of Outsider Art.

It's of particular relevance to Outsider Art that the sixteenth-century notion of melancholy, which was closely linked to this tradition, gave a peculiar temperamental colouring, based on the theory of humours and astrology, to the profession of artist, along with those of philosopher and mathematician. This Saturnine character was supposed to involve long periods of isolation and the protracted contemplation of images, which resulted in pronounced eccentricity and a suspicious attitude towards others – all characteristics that reappear in Outsider Art. The cult of 'originality', which was also a part of this myth, put the artist on the horns of a dilemma: to create their own unique form of expression they had to depart from accepted conventions; yet to step too far out of line meant risking misunderstanding and rejection. Hence artists were associated with exceptional forms

of expression in a highly ambivalent way: they might demonstrate power of invention and mastery of form; but they could also slip into something beyond conscious control, or too far outside the normal range of communication; perhaps even into a serious disorder that could easily be taken as a symptom of 'madness'. Indeed in the case of the 'psychotic art' that formed over half of Dubuffet's original *Art Brut* collection, it is as if, in a reversal of this process, such patients began to create their work at the deranged end of this spectrum and were subsequently proclaimed authentic artists.

The parallels with Outsider Art are obvious: however, there are some caveats to be taken into consideration. One is that the cult of melancholy was itself a recognized, collective category to which artists often chose to adhere, whereas those creators who were recruited into the canon of *Art Brut* were by definition unaware of the heresy into which they were being introduced. Another is that the 'originality' that the work of both seventeenth-century artists and Outsiders exemplifies is not an absolute or natural phenomenon, but one that stands in an antagonistic relation to contemporary aesthetic standards. This means that once such art becomes assimilated into the wider culture its originality becomes less distinct. In other words, although Outsider Art, and more obviously the *Art Brut* that preceded it, claims to belong outside culture, it is actually something like a reaction formation from within that culture, intended to contradict or subvert it. Once it is made public, as it was by Dubuffet's exhibiting and writing about *Art Brut*, there is a real question of how long this distinction can remain effective, given that the breakaway concept could either just evaporate or else must be faced with its eventual assimilation within that culture.

Another key element in this mythological complex is the idea that art and creativity are indelibly marked by sickness and suffering. Creativity and disturbance have a tangled relationship: even at the start of the tradition I have just sketched, it is often unclear whether suffering is a cause of creativity or a result of it. In fact creativity is a mixed blessing for the artist: whilst it can provide deep fulfilment and moments of ecstatic joy, it also involves a familiarity with the downs as well as the ups of inspiration, with depression,

emptiness and being stuck, as well as with the not always pleasant sense of being driven. The Romantic image of the artist as a misfit, someone at odds with society or the world, and therefore tormented by their gift, is a familiar one,[10] and Outsider Art could be seen as an extreme example of this. Institutionalization on account of mental illness or severe handicap seems an obvious index of alienation and the suffering that presumably goes with it, and it signals in a very concrete way the difference between the patient and the supposedly 'normal' world. Hence it is not surprising that so much of Dubuffet's early collection came from such sources, and a similar situation exists today in the relation between art produced in special studios for the disabled and Outsider Art. The converse, negative, perspective on this difference is brutally displayed by the fact that the work of psychotic patients that would later be classified as *Art Brut* figured, alongside works by Modernist artists, in the notorious *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition put on by the Nazis in 1937.

But the relationship between Outsider Art and suffering is not as straightforward as it seems. The mere fact that someone doesn't fit into society's norms is not necessarily a cause of suffering in itself: many eccentrics may be quite content with their peculiar situation, and even institutional confinement can act as a container or even as a kind of insulation from the pressures of real life. The isolation and neglect that causes some unknown artists pain might, in the case of an Outsider, be something to take a perverse pleasure in. In addition, suffering and sickness can also bring their own insights: as Antonin Artaud wrote,

> Sickness is one state.
> Health is only another,
> But shabbier,
> I mean more cowardly and sneaky.
> [. . .]
> I have been sick all my life and I ask only to carry on. For the states of life's privation have always kept me much better informed about the

> plethora of my powers than the petit-bourgeois belief
> GOOD HEALTH IS ALL YOU NEED[11]

This suggests a variety of ways in which, while a person labelled as an Outsider, especially in an institutional context, might seem to be seriously disadvantaged, they might nevertheless gain some advantages from it, though in ways we might find hard to understand.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, creativity is often supposed to be a compensatory response to early trauma or damage (such as childhood deprivation), and many Outsiders do indeed have such histories; yet however drastic or intense such afflictions may be, they do not account for why, out of the large number of people who have been psychologically damaged, only a tiny minority become artists. As Gaston Bachelard once observed, 'The compost does not explain the flower.' There is, as we shall see, some disagreement about this, and some writers hold that artistic creativity is a natural response to psychic distress and has an inherent healing function. It may also be true that in many such cases this creativity is repressed or not recognized. Nevertheless, Outsider Art, with its emphasis on isolation, deviance and difference, carries these links to a new extreme so that social or psychological alienation, if not certified psychopathology, almost become a precondition for authentic artistic creativity. The slippage between what is exceptional and what is abnormal about artistic creativity led Dubuffet to suggest:

> What we expect from art is not, for sure, that it should be *normal*. On the contrary, we expect it – and few would contradict this – to be as far as possible unpublished and unexpected . . . After that the imputation levelled against some works, that they are too unexpected or imaginative and their relegation on that account to the domain of pathological art makes one smile. It would be better and more consistent, to assert once and for all that the creation of art, wherever it appears, is always and in every case pathological.[12]

One way of understanding this is to recognize that there is a 'madness' entailed in making art – a dissolution of the normal boundaries between inside and outside, for example – which is not unlike what, in a different context, is taken as symptomatic of 'mental illness'. This would account for the fact that many people react to such art, and perhaps especially to its outlaw forms in *Art Brut*, with hostility or dismissal.

However, this connection between creativity and madness is a well-known part of the mythology of creativity rather than an actual fact, and we must beware of taking this association too literally: as Dubuffet himself wrote, 'Very often the most delirious, the most feverish works, those that are apparently stamped most clearly with the characteristics ascribed to madness, have as their authors people considered as normal.'[13] The relation between institutionalized madness, creativity and what I have called the 'madness' inherent in art-making is a complex one. Without denying the very real suffering involved in mental disturbance, it's also fair to say that the ever-expanding psychiatric classification of various forms of human suffering as syndromes or disorders, enshrined in successive editions of the *American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, for example, has in effect pathologized a great deal of the complex and unpredictable strangeness of human behaviour. I think that Outsider Art, even more than other art, taps into the pockets of craziness we all have inside us. Furthermore, whatever the source of an individual's suffering, once it becomes the raw material for their art it inevitably undergoes transformations that include its deepening and sharpening, so that it may look or feel more extreme than the artist's actual experience. There is even what might be called a 'rhetoric of extremity' – vividly embodied in Artaud's work, for example – that amplifies and dramatizes this suffering. This applies even to work produced under the diagnosis of madness (see chapter Three).

Meanwhile, whatever the relationship of its creators to madness or suffering may be, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that many of the artworks given the title *Art Brut* or Outsider Art really do evoke an unusually vivid and complex range of responses: excitement, wonder, fascination and

even degrees of anxiety or disquiet. This is to a considerable extent due to their inherent psychological and aesthetic characteristics, and I have already argued that the two are inseparable. Although the term 'aesthetic' evokes sophisticated theories about the nature of art, beauty and truth, it does not have to be limited to what is pleasurable, well-balanced or celebratory, for example. There is another, more down-to-earth way of defining it, one that depends much more intimately on the actual material qualities of the work in question: as the entire range of qualities experienced, from the elegant and balanced to the clumsy or ungainly, including also the bland or tasteless.[14] It was, of course, the awkward that most attracted Dubuffet:

> It is only in this '*Art Brut*' that we find, in my view, the natural and normal processes of creating art in their pure and elementary state . . . it matters little to me that the works created are on a small scale, put only limited means to use and confine themselves, in some cases, to little scrawls barely elaborated and very summary, outlined on a wall with a knife-point, or with a pencil on a poor piece of happenstance paper.[15]

These rudimentary and awkward, if not downright crude, qualities are far removed from the sophistications of the conventional art world. As we have seen, frequent attempts were made within Modernism to push the boundaries of the aesthetic further and further out and to deliver a salutary jolt to conventional notions of order, balance, pleasure and the like – the appeal to the 'primitive' is just one example – and *Art Brut* can be seen as a kind of climax to this cultural shock therapy.

Each of these supposedly 'aesthetic' qualities has its own psychological accompaniment, whether we are fully aware of it or not; and part of this psychological-aesthetic response is what I have already called the imaginative inhabitation of an artwork. Feeling our way into a work, or 'wandering about' in it, and allowing it to evoke a wide range of images and feelings is a crucial part of our aesthetic response, and one that is seldom as disinterested as philosophical theory makes out. In some ways the conventional envelope of

historical or biographical information typical of the presentation of artworks in galleries and museums distracts us from these more 'subjective' aspects of response; but Outsider Art, because of its comparative lack of such contextual cues, can force us to tune into them more directly. It is hard to avoid being carried away by the extravagant, voluptuous shapes and colours of Aloïse Corbaz's painting, or being caught up in the tightly synchronized contour lines of Martín Ramírez's landscapes, for example. These are not simply the result of whatever symbolism or iconography such work may include, nor are they purely formal features: they are subtle visual metaphors that often work at a subliminal level. This is a complex imaginative response, which includes not only recreations of how the work was made, but also deductions and fantasies about the life story of the person who made it. In the case of Ramírez, thanks to the work of Victor and Kristin Espinosa, we now know a lot more about his pre-confinement life in Mexico.[16] This throws light on his iconography – the virgins, *vacheros* (cowboys), the railroads and churches, and perhaps even some of the animals – but it does little to account for the extraordinary spatial perspectives in which he often sets them.

The 'space' in Ramírez is a dramatic and fictitious space, an iconic, rather than a representational one; that is to say there is no coherent overall perspective, but rather a series of local fields of what feels like spatial gravity. With its vertiginous swerving and plunging and its emphatic and insistent build-ups, it is at least as important as the figures framed or planted within it. 'Landscape' volumes acquire their own momentum, soaring and telescoping like a Coney Island ride. Indeed, what might be called the career of this space, its stretching and shrinking, is not so much symbolic – as in the oft-cited phallic plunge of trains into vaginal tunnels, for example – as profoundly metaphoric in a way that is at once abstract and imaginatively embodied.

Ramírez's use of space works in various ways that are often dissonant. The imaginary volumes he creates are often juxtaposed in flat contradiction, yet somehow they create a dramatic super-space; the sudden shifts between serried ranks of vertical and diagonal lines create a build-up of tension, and the 'black holes' opened up in the picture plane itself by windows, tunnel

entrances and the like seem to puncture the picture plane. Considering the short supply of material support available to him, at least before his work was recognized and encouraged in the hospital, it is remarkable how carefully calibrated the staging of individual figures is in Ramírez's work: there is an exact sense of just where they should best be placed, and it is rare for a composition to get overrun with competing elements (though this does sometimes happen, as if all the pictorial ingredients have curdled).

The theatrical *mise en scènes* that he creates for specially singled out figures (*vacheros*, madonnas and so on) have a stunning authority. Yet on closer inspection we can see that often the effect of their steeply modelled sides is achieved by an extraordinary process of graphic syncopation. Vertical or diagonal lines look as if they meet up with their counterparts, but actually don't; or there are strange shifts within the overall impression of coherence. It is almost as if Ramírez's pictorial space is constantly threatening to slip out of clutch; while at the same time it has him (and us) powerfully in its grip. The windows and tunnel entrances in his work, on the other hand, often have the effect of giving onto some unknowable dimension of emptiness: the windows are eerily blank, and even the horizontal 'lintels' or black backgrounds within which a figure is often presented drop into an impenetrable depth.

It would be easy to see these dislocations and abrupt encounters with nothingness as typical of 'schizophrenic art' (Ramírez's work was labelled as such when first exhibited in 1952), and his appearance as a mute, withdrawn, backward patient might lend support to this. However we have to be careful not to make this identification too quickly: the imaginative recreation of states of mind that we seem to find in the work we call 'Outsider' has as much to do with our assumptions about 'inner worlds' and how they might be expressed in art as it does with the actual mindset of the individual artist responsible for it. The image we form of an artist's inner world may be different from whatever versions of it can be deduced or reconstructed on the basis of the artist's own statements or with the help of background information or circumstantial evidence. Whilst an artist's work gradually builds up a complex picture of an inner world with its own idiom of images

that we think of as expressive or characteristic of them, to such an extent that it often becomes a kind of shorthand ('Dalínian', 'Picassoesque'), this is something that cannot actually be identified with the artist's personal life in any straightforward way. Indeed it is to some extent a fiction, even for the artist in whose work it is supposed to be reflected; or, to put it differently, it may be just as much the result of feedback from the artwork as of something put into it by the artist. Inner worlds, or the characteristic 'signature' of an artist, are certainly not confined to the realm of the intentional, but include many other channels of expression, such as the automatic, the subliminal or the unconscious; and the question of the extent to which the artist can be held personally responsible for some of them is tricky and often insoluble.

Nevertheless, there is always the temptation to read into the work something from the artist's life story, particularly when this has been a disturbed or traumatic one, and in some cases this aspect almost eclipses any other way of viewing it, as in the example of Van Gogh.[17] In the case of Outsider Art not only does the work itself often have a powerful psychological impact, but our image of the Outsider conjures up the fantasy of a correspondingly strange life story. This narrative is also crucial to establishing that this really is an authentic case of Outsider creativity. However this story fascinates us not just because it seems to corroborate the artist's antisocial or extracultural situation, but because it also suggests experiences that may be so strange as to be almost beyond the pale. Even where facts about the artist's life are fragmentary or missing, there may still be an institutional context – a recognized disorder or disability, for example – that is enough to conjure up extreme psychological states, whether of excess or deprivation, that we can barely guess at. To go back to the example of Ramírez, the discrepancy between the immediate impact of his work and the allegedly mute and withdrawn patient who created them could hardly be more striking.

The history of 'psychotic art' (usually work created by patients with the diagnosis of schizophrenia) illustrates how powerful the need is to see the work as a way in to the otherwise inaccessible 'inner world' of the patient-artist. Several decades ago an advertisement for anti-psychotic

medication reproduced a work by Wölfli, claiming it offered a window into the inner world of a typical schizophrenic. Quite apart from the fact that Wölfli was hardly typical, there is another problem involved with treating any artwork in this way. No artwork, however hallucinatory or illusionistic it may look (or however much the artist may insist on its visionary nature) can ever give us a direct, unmediated access to the mental experiences that gave rise to it. It is not simply that such painting, despite its apparent transparency, is a material object with its own attributes, which may sometimes interfere with that 'transparency': it is also that, as most artists know, the evolving work is itself a contributor to the final outcome. Yet the assumption that 'psychotic artists' are driven by compulsion adds to the pressure to see their work as a direct transcription of their experience, and also eliminates the possibility that other factors, such as play or irony, might be at work: the fact that many early psychotic artists were well versed in the techniques of graphic representation makes this more likely. On the other hand, few Outsider artists have any fluency in academic modes of representation (Vonn Stropp is a striking exception) and this means that the communication of inner experience must take place in other ways.

This problem is compounded by the way in which some of the conventions of representational art have been so deeply ensconced in our imaginations that we assume they are a natural transcription of what we imagine, remember or invent. The whole post-Renaissance figurative tradition, with its system of representation and its elisions between perceived and imaginary figures, external and internal spaces, has permeated our 'inner' worlds to such an extent that we readily assume it is their natural idiom, and it takes an artist like Magritte to point out its inconsistencies and paradoxes. In other words, there is a kind of feedback loop between the artistic re-presentations of real or imaginary scenes according to these conventions and the 'original' scenes they are supposed to be recording. Yet we still persist in assuming that the experience of dreaming, for example, inevitably has these characteristic features, and that an artwork using the same conventions is therefore 'faithful' to such experiences.

Vonn Stropp, *Oestrum*, 1985, acrylic on board, 183 x 122 cm. This work displays a mannerist and psychedelic virtuosity reminiscent of Dalí: all the more astonishing since Vonn Stropp is an autodidact.

Modernism challenged many of these representational conventions, first of all by deforming them (most obviously in Expressionism) and then by abandoning them (with the emergence of abstraction, for example). It's a curious paradox that early Surrealist art, precisely because of its investment in representing the alternative realities of dream and fantasy, clung onto them when so many other conventions were defied. A comparable situation seems to have occurred, almost contemporaneously, in 'psychotic art', where the same representational conventions were subject to idiosyncratic distortions. Because of the absence of any intelligible account of their motives from the artist themselves, it is impossible to tell to what extent these departures were deliberate. This is not just an academic point: on it depended, and perhaps sometimes still depends, a whole cluster of psychiatric assessments of the degree to which a patient was in touch with external reality. I think one of the reasons why Dubuffet was not impressed when he actually visited the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg may have been that much of the work in it is engaged in various ways with these figurative conventions, albeit in modes that may be ironic or subversive. He was more interested in work that ignored or bypassed them altogether, and that seemed to express its creator's real thoughts and feelings more immediately. Although a good deal of the work in Dubuffet's early *Art Brut* collection was more or less figurative, one obvious area in which this seems to happen is in work that doesn't appear to represent anything recognizable, and that might therefore be called 'abstract'.

The relation between the resort to abstract forms and a difficulty in communicating in conventional terms is one that also figures almost simultaneously in early Modernism and in contemporary psychiatric discourse. Whilst some artists such as Kandinsky or Klee claimed that shapes and colours had 'spiritual' or 'inner world' associations, others, such as Arp, maintained that they had no reference beyond themselves. In psychiatry the assumption was easy to make, that abstraction was symptomatic of a withdrawal from external reality: even someone as liberal in their attitude towards Modernism as Prinzhorn had to recognize that the ambition to depict 'pure psychic qualities' (a phrase that also crops up in

the first Surrealist Manifesto) brought with it the risk of failing to communicate. Whereas he thought that this risk was deliberately embarked on by avant-garde artists, he felt that it was imposed on the schizophrenic artist 'as a gruesome, inescapable fate, against which he often struggles for some time until he submits'.[18] Here again issues about the status of 'inner worlds' and the different ways in which art 'communicates' them, are relevant.

The notion of 'communication' in art is a notoriously problematic one: of course much art has something explicit to communicate, whether it is about the artist's personal life, human existence in general or political or religious ideas, for example. Outsider Art, too, often has its own freight of message: sometimes this is directly emotional (for example, in Emma Hauck's desperately superimposed appeals to her husband) and sometimes it is a complex, almost indecipherable mass of information (as in Wölfli or Willem van Genk). But it is only in explicit and literal forms of communication, such as propaganda, that messages are directly and simply presented: in most other forms of art there is a complex interplay between what is being communicated and how it is communicated. Stylistic variations play an important part in shaping the nature of artistic communication. (I think here of Raymond Queneau's wonderfully inventive *Exercises of Style* in which the same couple of trivial incidents are related in more than a hundred different ways.)[19] But the question remains of the extent to which the disruptions or distortions of the conventional rules of communication that are such a conspicuous characteristic of psychotic art in particular, and of much *Art Brut* in general, are conscious or unconscious.

However there is a deeper level at which these questions about communication have to do with the nature of artistic expression itself. Works of art, whether or not they are abstract, 'communicate' in a much less explicit or deliberate way than the more or less straightforward delivery of some kind of message. This is often experienced by the spectator as if it were the frustration, whether accidental or deliberate, of explicit communication (again this is one of the defining characteristics of 'psychotic art'); but it is actually a more fundamental, less conscious kind of communication. While

Augustin Lesage, *Untitled*, 1928, oil on canvas, 140 x 110 cm. In this 'decorative painting' the idiom of decoration – symmetrically repeated motifs and artificial blotches – might look abstract, but it is associated with mythological and religious figures typical of Spiritualism.

Gaston Duf, *Untitled*, 1949, gouache on paper, approx. 26 x 20 cm. Duf's bristling menagerie of grotesque creatures is painted with a savage gusto that is echoed in the spiky calligraphy of his inscriptions.

we can still recognize the 'signature' of the artist, embodied in the facture or handling of their medium, for example, this is something over which they have at best a partial control, and its effect on us is often a subliminal one. This could be said to be true even in those cases, such as the mediumistic paintings of Augustin Lesage, where the handling is laborious and repetitive. In other examples of *Art Brut* – in the work of Gaston Duf or Johann Hauser, for example – there is a facture that has an immediately striking effect which seems to confirm Dubuffet's claim that: 'It is the property of art, in the first instance, to smash all the crust of routine, to crack open the shell of policed and socialized man, to unblock the channels through which the voices of his internal wild man can express themselves.'[20] Notice that for Dubuffet, too, the power of *Art Brut* is due to its direct connection with an internal world that is irrational and otherwise inarticulate. In other words, such works of art can tap into a pre-linguistic, perhaps even pre-symbolic, level of experience, one that for that very reason may be felt as profoundly unsettling. This is part of what I call the 'madness' of art-making: the dissolution of normal boundaries and distinctions, to begin with in the artist, but subsequently in the spectator.

We have already seen that exploring such new, dangerous and exciting kinds of aesthetic qualities, with all their disconcerting psychological effects, in the sense I have outlined, was a conspicuous element in Modernism, and that Dubuffet's polemical invention of *Art Brut* is a continuation of this: he considered it to be the antithesis of an oversophisticated culture that had become, in his words, 'suffocating'. *Art Brut* brought a breath of fresh air in that it was a direct expression of 'the values of wildness: instinct, passion, caprice, violence, delirium'.[21] The unselfconscious and immediate nature of these forms of expression showed itself in their awkward and unconsidered style, involving

> careless outlines, dirty colours, repetitions and omissions, or even, to shift things from the level of technique to that of the moods inspiring the work, the resort, in some cases, to positions as ill-advised as, for example, confusion of mind, poverty of thought, imbecilic stupor: [these] don't seem to me necessarily negative values.[22]

The provocative use of the term 'imbecilic' is something that will feature later when I discuss work from special studios for the handicapped, but it's clear that what first attracted him to such work was its rudimentary, 'primitive' quality: something almost anonymous, which he identified with a popular or democratic creativity, as opposed to the oversophisticated and distorted versions of it to be found in professional art.

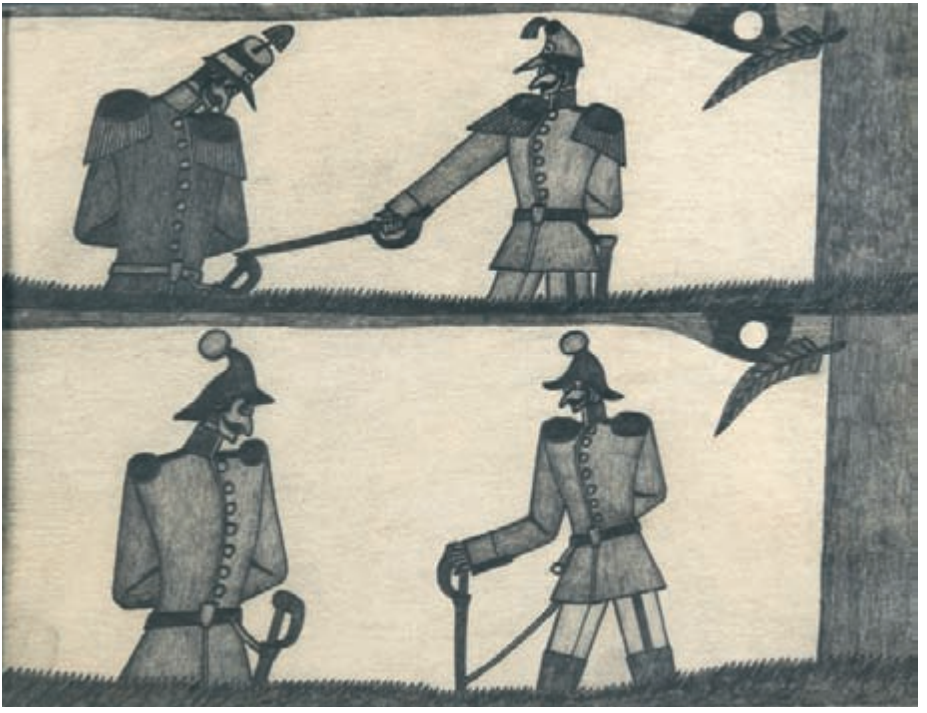
This idea that there is a fundamental and latent creative capacity that is repressed or obliterated by education and civilization is one that Dubuffet alludes to from time to time:

> We believe, contrary to the classic notion, that the impulses to create art, far from being the privilege of exceptional individuals, are in bountiful supply in any passer-by, but that they are usually held in check, adulterated or counterfeited out of concern for social alignment and in deference to received myths.[23]

This amounts to a different kind of myth about creativity to the post-Renaissance one mentioned earlier, which revolves around the artist as an individual and maverick figure, and this, too, could be said to have its own history. If we broaden the aperture to include manifestations that precede anything like our concept of 'art', it is possible to see what we call artistic creativity as having descended from an original Palaeolithic mode of 'making special', where it might have fulfilled positive and social functions, many of which are echoed in more recent tribal cultures, into the world of modern art, in which it appears in an alienated and distorted form.[24] The question then is whether Outsider Art is a throwback to this earlier collectively orientated mode of creativity, or whether it is in effect a projection of the post-Renaissance picture of creativity as something exceptional and individualistic. It is obvious that Dubuffet's conception of *Art Brut* and our modern image of the Outsider are both focused on the antisocial, secretive and perverse aspects of the work, rather than on what might be of value to the community from which the Outsider is, by definition, already alienated.

Not only do the isolation and eccentric circumstances of *Art Brut* creators seem to exclude any obvious audience, but sometimes its overt content – the blatant sexuality of Johann Hauser's women, the masturbatory icons of Josef Hofer, or the queasy scenes of child massacre in Henry Darger, for example – seems to ignore or defy social or moral conventions, making the artist seem an Outsider in more ways than one. In other cases there is a powerful sense of something or someone being addressed, but with an extravagant kind of rhetoric that is very likely the result of isolation or alienation: this could be said to be the case with Adolf Wölfli or Jeanne Tripier, for example. In other instances enormous effort and concentration are spent on 'messages' that often have a powerful aura of secrecy or are couched in an obscure code to which we will never be given the key, as, for example, in the haunting nocturnal charades of Oscar Voll. Sometimes it seems as if the audience is invisible – perhaps posterity, or even God himself – at other times it almost seems as if the artist is talking to themselves. In effect there is no clear distinction between these: as Dubuffet himself pointed out, the Other may be: 'a *supposed* being, not yet existent, a being in the likeness of whoever imagines it. It can be a chimerical other. More or less chimerical, notice . . . There is an involuntary chimerical and a deliberate chimerical, adopted in full lucidity. A powerful weapon given to any of us against reality, against others, against *order.*'[25] Of course these phenomena can also be found in the work of other, supposedly more conventional, artists, and much post-Modernist art has played with notions of self, alibi and adopted voices. But there is a poignancy in the kind of dumb-show, so vulnerable to misunderstanding, that much classic psychotic art presents us with, and we as spectators are fascinated by what seems to be on the very edge of the communicable.

Inevitably we come back to the question of how far *Art Brut* creators have to some extent deliberately chosen to make their work difficult to access, and we have already seen how this issue can be traced all the way back to the post-Renaissance cult of originality. Dubuffet was well aware of this:



Oscar Voll, *Untitled*, before 1920, pencil on paper, 24.5 x 31.5 cm. These drawings are in small notebooks in a heavy graphite that prints onto the next page; but this is only one reason for the repetition in his lunar pantomimes.

> Here's how the artist's ambiguous position is defined. If his production isn't stamped with a very highly marked personal character (which implies a individualistic and hence necessarily antisocial and subversive position) it is of no account. If, however, this individualistic inclination is taken to the point of refusing all communication with the public, if this individualistic stance is exacerbated to the point of not wanting the work to be seen by anyone, or even deliberately to make it so secret, so coded, that it utterly hides from sight, then its subversive character disappears: it becomes like an explosion that, taking place in a vacuum, gives out no sound.[26]

Again, the wish not to communicate and to avoid being too quickly understood, as well as the need to preserve the secrecy of some parts of their work, is something common to many artists besides Outsiders. In any case, secrecy in art is not always a matter of something that could be revealed, being deliberately concealed: it can sometimes be a part of a work's essential mystery.

This sense of secrecy is reinforced by the fact that, although art-making is often an essentially solitary experience, *Art Brut* presents us with an exceptionally isolated image of the artist, whose profoundly antisocial nature is reinforced by the artist's silence. As Dubuffet wrote:

> The creation of art, to have its full measure of interest, necessitates a concentration and a solitude that are hardly compatible with the social life of our professional artists. It's when a man is alone, when he is seriously bored, when he cannot count on any kind of distraction or enjoyment coming from outside, no kinds of celebration, that the conditions are best fulfilled for the need to arise in him to contrive for himself by his own means, all alone and according to his own idiom, a theatre of celebrations and enchantments.[27]

In all these ways *Art Brut* seems the antithesis of the evolutionally adapted or socially functional creativity that Ellen Dissenayake writes about. Sometimes

our involvement with Outsider Art can feel like eavesdropping on a solipsist: for example in the rhetoric of delusion in psychotic art (Carl Lange's work is one example), or in Josef Hofer's work. But this can be true of art other than Outsider Art: even if works of art don't always have a specific audience in mind, to create a work is already to step out of oneself, to make something that has its own independence and by that token alone is potentially available to others. We will see an extreme example of this when discussing the sculptures of the mute Down's syndrome artist Judith Scott. This situation is reflected in several creation myths where the universe is created out of an auto-erotic act but is also a panacea for the creator's own loneliness. Yet the paradox remains, that despite – or perhaps because of – their extreme isolation, the work of many Outsider artists addresses an audience of some kind, even if it is one that is unknown or imaginary.

The most dramatic forms of message with an unknown address, and where we aren't always sure from whom the message is coming, appear in the context of the phenomenon of dictation, which is characteristic both of psychotic hallucination and of mediumistic inspiration. In both instances the normal identity of the artist is apparently taken over: they seem to be a vehicle for forces outside their conscious control. In a similar way, Outsider artists often talk about working in a trancelike state in which they feel compelled to produce their work. In psychosis what takes over are supposedly unconscious or instinctual impulses; in mediumistic possession it is messages from various kinds of spirit from another world: in both instances many of the same automatisms can be seen to be at work. Although many of the processes of inscription – the cramming of motifs within a confined space, the systematic permutation of forms that hover on the edge between the figurative, the elision between the decorative and the symbolic, the mixture of alphabetic and pictographic elements, for example – have a generic, almost anonymous character, each artist's work nevertheless carries its own individual stamp. These paradoxical aspects of automatism are, of course, not peculiar to Outsiders: they are, as we shall see, features common to a good deal of Modernist practice, most obviously in Surrealism.

Where does this almost relentless permutation of forms come from? The usual psychological view is that in each case what the individual experiences as 'other' is in reality a dissociated part of themselves. This is also the opinion of some experts on *Art Brut*. Many writers, among whom Michel Thévoz is the sharpest voice, have maintained that spiritualism, in the cases of Lesage and Lonné, for example, functioned simply as an alibi for a creativity that would otherwise have found no licensed outlet.[28] The spiritualist poems that Lonné wrote are certainly of far less interest than his bewilderingly fertile drawings, and as he became more recognized as an artist, he renounced his previous beliefs. However, we have to beware of two things: one is that Lonné may have felt under some external pressure to renounce what those who appreciated his work as *Art Brut* saw as superstitious beliefs; and the other is that, despite our collective inclination to see art as the expression of an individual inner world, or at most some kind of zeitgeist, inspiration may not be an entirely personal affair.

Certainly the Renaissance cult of melancholy and Saturnine influence, which I alluded to earlier, and which can be seen as an avatar of Outsider Art, included the belief that transpersonal factors were responsible for artistic inspiration. In this they were following Plato's lead, and it is worth remembering that for him poetic *mania* derived from the gods and inspired the creation of works of art whose meaning had, incidentally, to be interpreted by someone other than the possessed poet themselves. Renaissance Neo-Platonists talked in terms of gods or spirits presiding over different forms of artistic creativity, and many of them believed in the existence of a *mundus imaginalis* similar to the realm of Jungian archetypes, whose images were of more than personal import, from which such inspiration derived. All I am saying is that, no matter how bizarre, grotesque or even hackneyed we might find some of the content of such 'dictated' artwork, we should be wary of bringing it down to a purely biographical earth. A modified version of this is the amazement we sometimes feel, that someone has been able to create such an extraordinary body of work seemingly out of the blue, even if it seems to require a degree of ventriloquism.

I now want to go back to the variety of work that is subsumed under the label of *Art Brut*. I have already mentioned work that carries some kind of a message. Much of the mediumistic work I have just been talking about, despite its Spiritualist inspiration, and although it may include words (as in some of Laure Pigeon's drawings, for example) has no obvious message: it seems to feed more off itself, in the way that the process of 'doodling' is supposed to, and involves a similar slippage between verbal and visual elements. The doodle is in several ways the prototype for much Outsider Art, not only because it is associated with escapism and absent-mindedness, but because it is a modest, unassuming and popular phenomenon – although since doodling is a kind of riposte to language, whether spoken (phone calls) or written (agendas for meetings), it still depends upon some degree of literacy. It also reminds us that a work has its own momentum that is to a considerable extent independent of the artist who is creating it, which may even take the lead in various ways. There is an uncertain relation between the trance characteristic of Spiritualism and the trance-like states in which some Outsiders have described making their art, which are induced by becoming absorbed by the process of mark-making, and, as Roger Cardinal has suggested,[29] this may be echoed in the spectator's response.

Just as the process of doodling takes over and generates its own plethora of forms, so certain materials also seem to impose their own idioms (the binding strings of Judith Scott, the rags used by Michel Nedjar or the shells of Pascal Maisonneuve, for example). The frequent recycling of salvaged or discarded material in Outsider Art amounts to a peculiar form of what Lévi-Strauss called 'bricolage', in which elements from the outside world are appropriated for more personal and seemingly private ends, while still retaining something of their original associations. Again, many of these features are found in other forms of art, whether avant-garde or mainstream; but they are present in a more concentrated form in Outsider Art. Some Outsider artists (Hans Krusi or Van Genk, for example) actually seem to prefer scavenged materials to more conventional ones. It's as if for them the debris or detritus of our consumer culture is a kind of unconscious reservoir

and they give what has been rejected or trashed a new lease of life. In other cases, particularly inmates of asylums, such materials as paper sacks, old wrappings and even medical records are all they can get hold of.

Although, as we have seen, Dubuffet began by praising humble, small-scale works (as an ex-wine merchant, he claimed that a Vin du Pays could be just as enjoyable as a Château Lafite), early on he came across more extensive bodies of work, such as those of Ferdinand Cheval, Wölfli or Aloïse, that showed undeniable evidence of consistent skill and a coherent style sustained over several decades, while still looking radically different from anything to be found in commercial art galleries or museums. In fact, the process whereby these artworks were created was not dissimilar to the ways in which professional art is made, requiring a great deal of time and effort. Indeed, despite being a patient in the Waldau asylum, Wölfli clearly thought of himself as an artist (amongst other things): not only did he include elaborate plans for the printing and distribution of his work, and astronomical calculations of the levels of interest that would accrue, within the work itself, but parcels of materials were addressed to him as a 'picture maker' from the outside world. Aloïse, too, was a highly educated and cultivated young woman before her breakdown, and traces of her familiarity with the world of art and literature can be found in her work.[30] This foreshadows the position that some patient-artists find themselves in today.

It also brings up the whole question of the relation between *Art Brut* creators and the culture from which they are supposedly estranged. Encounters between eccentric or institutionalized creators and the world of collectors, let alone dealers or curators, were still the exception during the early phase of *Art Brut*, and, as I shall show in the next chapter, Dubuffet was extremely protective of both the work itself and the artists who made it. But half a century later, when awareness of *Art Brut* is more widespread, it is much more common for such artists to be discovered during their lifetime. It is also arguable that the extreme solitude and insulation from mass culture that seemed to be preconditions for authentic *Art Brut* have become harder to fulfil. Similarly, once launched upon the art world, the category of *Art Brut*

itself was condemned to a hopeless struggle against being assimilated by that world. In building on and expanding Dubuffet's legacy, Outsider Art has exacerbated many of the contradictions we have already looked at in *Art Brut*. The wish to rely on the intrinsic strange or exceptional characteristics of the work itself has become increasingly hard to realize, and more and more support is expected from circumstantial factors, such as institutionalization. In addition the stringent standards originally set by Dubuffet are getting harder and harder to meet, and much work that is called 'Outsider' fails to come up to them. So, while bizarre and unclassifiable work will continue to be discovered, we have to ask ourselves what purposes are actually served by calling it 'Outsider': this issue is a central focus of this book.

2
Outsider Art and the Creative Role of Collecting

In this chapter I want to look at the crucial role, both creative and controversial, played in the formation of *Art Brut* by collecting. I shall explore its psychological and cultural dynamics, which begin from a situation of something like secretive hoarding and end up as a body of material with its own tradition and standards of admission. In the course of this evolution many pioneering collections gradually shift from being the preserve of a chosen few to becoming public property, from being prospective and polemical to becoming an established institution. This is particularly problematic in the case of Outsider Art, because its status depends on being marginal, unofficial and contestatory: once it begins to enter the public domain its maverick character is likely to get diluted. This is illustrated by the career of Dubuffet's own Collection de l'Art Brut, which began as a literally underground cache and after a number of vicissitudes ended up thirty years later being gifted to the city of Lausanne, where it now has a permanent home. While this collection can lay fair claim to being the original *Art Brut* collection, a number of other substantial collections now exist in the public domain in Europe, Russia and America, as well as a considerable number of galleries specializing in Outsider Art.

Strange and unusual objects have been collected for centuries, at least since the seventeenth-century *Wunderkammern* or cabinets of curiosities. Their contents were usually divided into the natural and the artificial, and in a sense some of the objects or works collected under the label *Art Brut* or, more recently, Outsider Art belong to this tradition; I mean by this that from one point of view some Outsider work can readily be called 'art', while other bizarre objects that come within its remit could, because of the uncertain level of intentionality behind them, be more readily seen as *objets trouvés*.

Similarly, the contents of early psychiatric collections of patient art (that of Cesare Lombroso, for example) seem to occupy a no-man's-land in between natural curiosities and works of art. As we shall see, one of the crucial factors in the shift from one category to the other is the degree of individual responsibility that can be assigned to the person who created the work in order for it to be called 'art', and there is sometimes little reliable evidence on which to base this judgement. This in turn brings up the question of what could be called the balance of creativity between the original creator and us who discover their work and call it 'Outsider'.

A good example of this effect is the work of the so-called 'Philadelphia Wireman'. In 1983 a number of cartons full of strange metal objects made of scrap metal and twisted wire were discovered in an urban dump and assumed to be works of art.[1] These seven hundred objects had obviously been made deliberately, and in fact are oddly reminiscent of Judith Scott's 'fibre art'. This takes us back to some of the issues I raised with the fictitious example in the Introduction: we are faced with an array of extraordinary objects without any background information about who made them or why. Clearly these are 'works of art' in so far as someone has spent a lot of effort – and considerable strength – on assembling them from disparate material, and they are arguably 'Outsider' both on account of their picturesque provenance and because they owe nothing to any Fine Art tradition (although they have been compared with certain African fetishes). But there remains an uncertainty about how we arrived at these conclusions and, more pertinently, of what kind of intentionality might have been involved in their creation.

Collections of impressive or valuable items – both public, in the sense of royal or aristocratic ones, and more private or even secret ones – have been with us for a long time, and were often associated with the display of power, status and wealth, and indeed still are. Many of these early collections were quite heterogeneous, partly because the frontiers between natural science, magic and art were still fluid. In the collections of someone like Giuseppe Arcimboldo's patron, Emperor Maximilian II, for example, the dividing line is blurred between the scholarly, the artistic and the simply curious. The

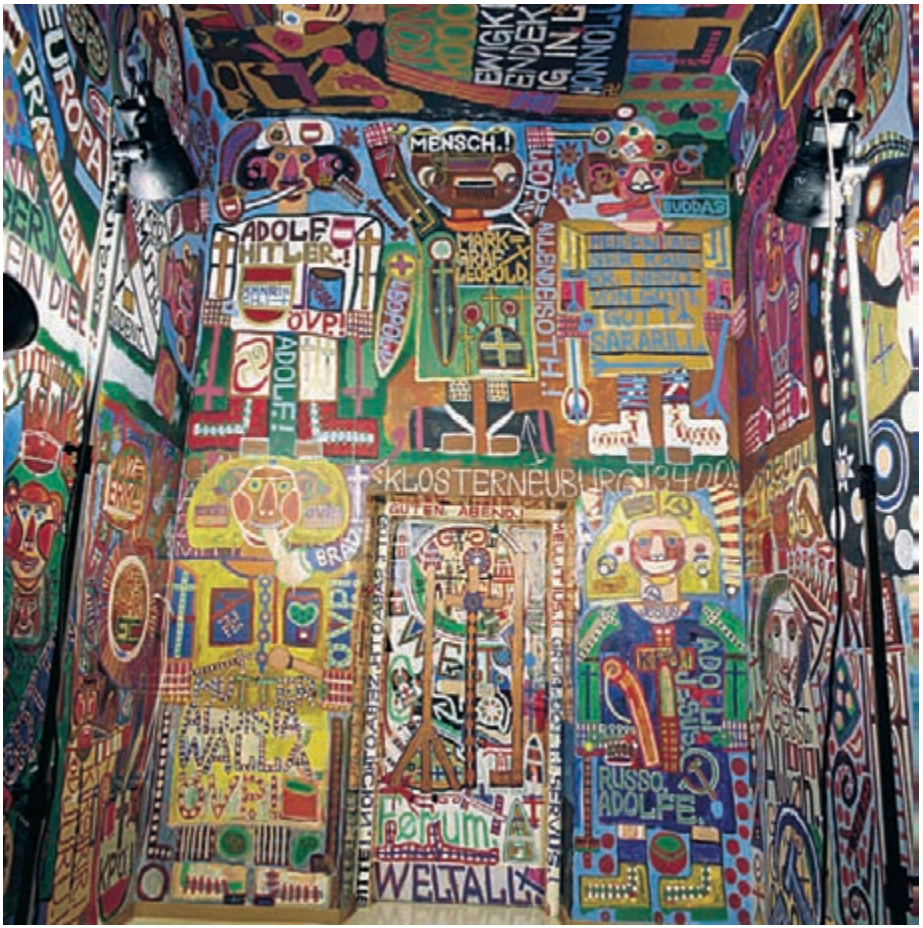
grander ones required huge amounts of money and space, and were sometimes also the result of theft, pillage or barter; a vivid example of this is the subject of *The Island of Lost Maps*.[2] Again, this is something that still happens today: the world of art and aesthetic appreciation has a darker, shadow side to it: powerful psychological forces, including greed, competitiveness, envy and even destruction swirl around these treasured objects. A telling vignette is the story of the seventeenth-century Dutch collector who purchased the only specimen of the black tulip bulb other than the one in his collection simply in order to crush it underfoot and eliminate the competition.

Nevertheless, what could be called classic collections ostensibly served rational and scholarly functions. Some had an archival purpose; they sought to preserve things from the ravages of time or the vicissitudes of history. Others built up a stock of objects held in high esteem by the upper classes: even if they were shown and admired only by a privileged elite, they demonstrated wealth and power, and the sophisticated taste associated with them. It is, in a way, ironic that many of these private collections have filtered into what we now know as the modern museum, with its 'public collections'. Such collections are conservative, in several senses: they were generally based on existing Fine Art and art-historical categories and the criteria that reinforced them, and they could be seen as essentially retrospective. A museum enshrines these criteria, and this is one of the reasons why arguments about attribution are so heated and why the acquisition of fakes can be so embarrassing to the institution concerned. A recent example is the case of the Greenhalgh family, whose activities led to a whole range of items from modern art to antiquities being faked and sold from an unassuming house on a Bolton council estate.[3] Some light is also shed by this case on the frustrated creativity of the faker and on his desire to make fools of the establishment. In this respect he is the exact converse of an Outsider artist: having little or no professional training, but managing nevertheless to create a convincing imitation of, and even supply a plausible provenance for, the genuine article.

There are, of course, other, more 'cutting edge' collections, particularly those focusing on promising young artists, and these can have a self-fulfilling

role: to be included in a collection such as the Saatchi, for example, is literally to have one's reputation made. Similarly, museums of Modern Art, such as Tate Britain, have a more obvious canonizing function. Despite its being promoted as an 'anti-museum', the Collection de l'Art Brut, which is based on Dubuffet's original collection, occupies a comparably ambiguous position: the works it preserves allegedly derive from outside the cultural domain; but at the same time it represents something like the Gold Standard of *Art Brut* and is inevitably playing an increasingly conservative role. It is in effect a museum, even if the objects on display in it originated from very different and less respectable situations. No matter how strenuous the efforts made to keep the Collection d l'Art Brut distinct from the mainstream, this is a symbolic marker of its assimilation, and it raises the question, which I shall return to in the Conclusion, of whether the term hasn't acquired more of an historical than an actual profile.

The collections that formed the foundation of Outsider Art, however, are somewhat different: they were, at least to begin with, unorthodox and free-range forays into an as yet uncharted territory, and hence could be called prospective. On the other hand, they were not concerned with the commercial promotion of the artists collected; hence, as we shall see, there was an almost secretive aspect to them. Certainly in the case of Dubuffet's collection there was also an overtly polemical edge to it; this is evident in the creative impetus behind the collection itself and in the texts that he published about the individual artists, as well as the profile of *Art Brut* based on their work. This results in some fundamental contradictions, which are perhaps a feature of any innovative collection. On the one hand, there is the excitement of discovering extraordinary works and of bringing them together in a collection where they begin to have something like a conversation with each other, and where the collector can gloat over their booty and take a secret delight in the treasure-trove they have built up (one collector of ethnographic material talked to me of 'the nectar of the object'). On the other, there is the wish to show this achievement off to others, but thereby risk starting a trend that will eventually ruin the secret and unspoiled terrain they have been exploring or creating.



August Walla, interior of room at Gugging, 2003. Walla covered outdoor and indoor spaces with figures and inscriptions derived from a contradictory multitude of sources, some of which can be found in his room.

If Dubuffet's *Art Brut* collection was an innovative and controversial act in itself, the many texts he published alongside it vividly articulate a critique of conventional ideas about the social function of art and received standards of taste (see chapter One). So there is a double argument at work here: the silent one of the collection itself, and the more explicit one of the texts inspired by it. Here I want to spend some time considering collecting as a creative act. Collections play a crucial role, not just in the evolution of Outsider Art, but in its very definition, because it is not a self-appointed movement, like Surrealism or Abstract Expressionism, but a category imposed from the outside, to which people may be said to belong without even knowing it. Hence there is a double-sided creativity at work: on the one hand, the work of isolated and eccentric creators, and on the other the 'eye' with which their art is recognized and rescued from obscurity by collectors. There may indeed be deeper correspondences: if the work of Outsiders is marked by obsessive permutations and compulsive activity, perhaps even by various forms of madness, then collecting their work may have many of those hallmarks too, as some collectors have been brave enough to admit.[4]

It's worth mentioning at this point that some Outsider artists themselves could be said to be collectors. Almost anything can form the basis for a collection: sometimes there is a clear demarcation zone – beer mats or barbed wire, for instance – at other times the sheer accumulation of miscellaneous junk or detritus acquires a monstrous momentum of its own. Examples of the first might include Van Genk's collection of plastic macs or Darger's archive of scavenged child imagery. Examples of the second might include Walla's room at Gugging, or Armand Schulthess's compendium of information and the equipment to gather and reproduce it. These collections are, of course, extremely vulnerable once their creators are decanted into 'homes' or dead. Schulthess's house was cleared and almost all its contents destroyed, and the 'garden of knowledge' he had so painstakingly built up in its orchards over the previous twenty years was gradually vandalized. Similar fates have befallen many Outsider archives and sites. This taps into the whole

issue of conservation, which has a particular poignancy to it in a context where the original work is often composed of haphazard materials of limited durability: in a sense this is poetic justice, in that what was created out of debris returns to its original source.

Dubuffet was well aware of the fragile and impermanent nature of the 'raw' creativity his collection sought to exemplify:

> With the creation of art – rare, exceptional – and its being broadcast, it's the same as with those desert islands whose wildness, which is part of their appeal, disappears as soon as the propaganda of hoteliers brings tourists there. Then all that is left is a repulsive fake wildness, and lovers of rare and exceptional creations look for somewhere else to pitch their tent.[5]

To begin with, he thought that his collection should only be accessible to a small group of cognoscenti, and its sometimes literally underground location underlined this. This was one way of trying to protect it from being appropriated by the mainstream art world: it also emphasized its divergence from norms and conventions, hence the title of the catalogue for an early exhibition in October 1949: '*Art Brut* preferred over cultural art.' In this early phase the differences between the two were obvious, and there was a correspondingly mixed reaction to it, ranging from enthusiasm to hostility.

Perhaps every such pioneering collection has a life of its own: there is the embryonic stage, where there is an inkling of an undiscovered country; then there is the growing realization of its full extent, and a sense of where to go next; then there is the mature stage, where the collection assumes its own substance and weight, and perhaps some pieces are weeded out; then there usually follows public recognition and acceptance; and finally there is a kind of stiffening, where the collection assumes its definitive and final form, and assumes an authority of some kind. Dubuffet's *Art Brut* collection certainly succeeded in demonstrating that there was an astonishing range of strikingly original work that seemed to be quite independent of the

Willem van Genk, *Groot Station, Arnhem*, undated, mixed media. Like an overgrown schoolboy, Van Genk was fascinated by public transport systems and global information networks, and he owned thousands of guidebooks and philosophical or political texts.

mainstream art world. The problem he now faced was how to display this without it becoming sucked into the very gallery and museum culture he had set out to contradict.

There are many difficult issues that surround the collecting, marketing and appreciation of Outsider Art, and they have been aggravated by the accelerating commercialization of the field. Gary Fine gives an excellent account of the complex relations between the discovery of a 'self-taught' or 'contemporary folk' artist and what sometimes amounts to their invention as an 'Outsider'.[6] In some cases (Edgar Tolson or Howard Finster, for example) dealers and collectors, or even family members, have in effect acted as what Fine calls 'reputational entrepreneurs', that is, people who take the Outsider under their wing and, for a mixed bag of motives, promote them and their work.[7] Fine's work certainly shows the degree of pressure transmitted from

the commercial gallery through the dealer and, sometimes, the local 'picker', eventually down to the artist concerned. Here again we glimpse what I have called the shadow side of collecting. Some of these issues will crop up again in discussing the effect of exhibition and recognition on living Outsider artists (see chapter Six). For the moment, however, I want to explore something of the strange parallels between the obscure motivations of classic Outsiders to create and the 'madness' of collecting.

A number of books have been published dealing with both the history and the psychology of collecting in general.[8] As Roger Cardinal has pointed out, the collection comes to shape the collector as much as the other way around.[9] Several Outsider Art collectors have, as mentioned earlier, admitted to the addictive or obsessive element in their collecting, and, whatever personal psychological factors may be involved, this can also be seen as an echo of the obsessive and compulsive character of the artworks they collect. There has also been a solitary and unrecognized aspect to collecting Outsider Art, especially in the early days when the genre was not yet well known: this too resonates with the isolation and secrecy of much Outsider Art. Such collecting is also a kind of scavenging, a pursuit of things and ideas that are off the beaten track, and this also has its parallels in the Outsider world, for example in the encyclopaedic accumulation of references in Cheval's Palais Idéal, in the library and multimedia equipment (much of which was not plugged in) of Schulthess's domain, or in Willem van Genk's bricolaged tramway systems, as well as his global information panoramas.

This situation changes once *Art Brut* becomes more established and begins to acquire its own pedigree criteria, and in fact its own tradition, with widely recognized *Art Brut* 'classics' such as Wölfli, Aloïse or Ramírez. There can be no doubt that Dubuffet also had to admit that the stringency of his original criteria could not be insisted upon, and that 'It would be a good idea to look on *Art Brut* rather as a compass point, like a wind that blows with greater or less strength, and which is often not the only one blowing.'[10] Collectors of Outsider Art now have to decide whether to follow these original benchmarks, as Decharme's abcd collection does, for example,

or to branch out in a different direction. And this, of course, brings up the question of what determines this direction: is it simply work that is extraordinary or exceptional, no matter when, where or by whom it is created? This problem is reminiscent of the dilemma in relation to African art faced by members of the Documents group in the 1930s. Some writers, Carl Einstein for example, felt that works that showed signs of outside influence (by depicting guns or Europeans) were contaminated and inauthentic; others, probably including Bataille himself, felt that it was precisely these impure, hybrid forms that were the most provocative.

Dubuffet's insistence that *Art Brut* creators should have had no contact with the professional world of art and that their work should be distinct from Folk Art and other existing genres was a kind of guarantee of the absolute originality of their work. The work itself had to be strikingly unconventional; and this outside aspect was not just confirmed, but authenticated, by the fact that its creator was entirely free from artistic training and influence. Here again we see that the background story plays a crucial role in determining Outsider status. Sometimes this led to artists being welcomed into his collection and then subsequently excluded when it was discovered that they had been in too close touch with some part of the art world. Such was the case with Gaston Chaissac, whose work Dubuffet at first supported and encouraged, but who also showed an awareness of contemporary art by making playful reference to the style of artists like Picasso, which eventually led to his expulsion from the Collection de l'Art Brut. On the other hand, purely circumstantial factors, such as being a psychiatric patient, were not enough to offer such a guarantee: after his visit to the Prinzhorn Collection in 1950, he observed that: 'Everything that makes for bad art – phenomena of imitation, imposture, mannerism, etc – but also mediocrity and platitude – can, as I've been able to verify, be met with as frequently amongst the mentally ill as among ordinary people.'[11] We shall see in the next chapter that this is in stark contrast to the view that there is a special relationship of one kind or another (compensatory or self-healing) between mental illness and artistic creativity.

What we see at work in the evolution of *Art Brut* are the dynamics of controversy. This has an internal aspect: what begins as a refusal or reversal of accepted values inevitably sets up its own counter-orthodoxy, and this leads to quarrels and expulsions (as happened with Surrealism under André Breton's leadership, for example). It also has an external aspect: what is, to begin with, unacceptable or indigestible to the cultural mainstream (or even to the avant-garde) is eventually assimilated into that mainstream, or some part of it. This phenomenon of something radical being subsequently superseded and turning into something against which the following generation would react is a familiar element in the early twentieth-century avant-garde: it had already been foreseen by the Italian Futurists who in many ways set the pace for the Modernist pattern of successive waves of innovation cancelling out each other. Furthermore, such movements are inevitably subject to a process of cultural digestion, in which what is unpalatable to begin with eventually becomes more easily assimilated, if not standard fare.

This also applies to the effect of individual artworks. Anton Ehrenzweig, in the 1960s, suggested that certain kinds of form (he called them 'Gestalt-free' or 'inarticulate') are too richly ambiguous to be assimilated by the conscious mind and are rejected as senseless or chaotic. However, as they begin to circulate in culture, we become more used to them, until they become familiar, even clichéd, so that their original shocking and exciting character is diluted and softened.[12] This theory could be applied to many forms of Outsider Art. A number of writers have already argued that something like this is happening to Outsider Art,[13] and it is an issue I shall return to in the Conclusion. The assimilation of *Art Brut* has been accelerated by the fact that numerous late twentieth-century artists – for example, many members of the Cobra group, Arnulf Rainer, Julian Schnabel, Georg Baselitz and others, not to mention Dubuffet himself – have consciously imitated the style or incorporated motifs from such work in their own.

In addition, the supply of classic *Art Brut* work is now beginning to dry up: large, old-fashioned mental hospitals are being closed down, the percolation of mass media into everyday life is harder to avoid, and the whole

phenomenon of Outsider Art is, I shall argue, probably doomed to become an art-historical item. Meanwhile, the range of work covered by the term or its cognates continues to expand: this makes me wonder how much longer Outsider Art can continue to be redefined without ending up as such a mixture of genres that it has lost almost all its central consistency. Here there might be another, less comfortable, parallel: just as Outsider artists are often thought to be contaminated by too conscious a relationship with the art world, so the notion of Outsider-ness itself could be said to have become commercialized and to have extended itself to such an extent and to have reached a point of such self-consciousness that its own originality and authenticity have been seriously affected.

All of this adds up to a picture of *Art Brut* as something like a rare and pure extract, with a half-tonic, half-poisonous effect: once it is introduced into mainstream culture, not only will that culture be affected by it and form its own critical and commercial antibodies, but the substance itself will eventually be broken down or adulterated. However, as I have already pointed out, many of the assumptions built into the notion of *Art Brut* – that its creators owe nothing to any tradition, that they have no professional skill, that they ignore or disdain public acceptance, for example – are not entirely supported by the facts. Even during Dubuffet's lifetime it became obvious that there was a loosely defined group of maverick creators who nevertheless had had some contact with, but managed not to be infected by, the mainstream art world. One way of coping with this was to open a new category: that of *Neuve Invention*. This was a renaming, in 1982, of Dubuffet's Collection Annexe, a kind of appendix to the main collection consisting of work by artists such as Chaissac or Louis Soutter who had already had some contact with the world of art. An unexpected side-effect of this was that the Collection was besieged by artists claiming to belong to this category and entry to it had to be halted.[14] This experiment is as good an indication as any other of the fact that *Art Brut* had already reached a crucial turning-point in its relation to mainstream culture.

It must now be obvious why the term 'Outsider Art' (first coined by Roger Cardinal in 1972) is itself a contradiction in terms in much the same

way as the concept of a 'private language'. To be truly 'outside' all norms and all traditions, a work has also to be outside the art world. But it is really not possible for anyone to be totally outside the culture they inhabit; and even if this seemed possible before the advent of modern mass media, it would seem to be much harder today. In addition, many Outsiders do have a cultural background, but it is one not readily recognized by mainstream, official culture (for example, Mexican-American or African). Likewise, many of the 'psychotic artists' whose work forms a substantial part of the Collection de l'Art Brut did in fact have more of a professional background (as engineers, or graphic artists, for example) than was allowed for by the myth of absolute originality in which various writers embedded them (see chapter Three).

If this was the situation of some of those who could be called the first generation of Outsiders – those whose work was often seized upon after their death or without their knowledge or consent – it is even more true for those who are subsequently 'discovered'. Many of them will also have some preconception, however skewed, of the category into which they are, wittingly or unwittingly, being co-opted, and the consequent paradox is that they, even more than conventional artists, will have to find some way of accommodating to this (see chapter Six). The influence that dealers and collectors have, even if they do not intend it, on any artist who starts to enjoy commercial success is, as I have already pointed out, particularly problematic in the case of Outsider Art. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the boundaries of the term have now been stretched to include 'visionary art', 'self-taught art', 'contemporary folk art', 'marginal arts', not to mention a whole set of new categories such as *Art Singulier*, *Art hors les normes*, *Art en marge*, *Création Franche* and the like. Many of these have collections as their definitive platform, and special sites in which to exhibit them, as well as in-house journals and catalogues.

If you look through the pages of *Raw Vision*, which is probably the magazine with the widest circulation in this field, and which has been published to a very high standard since it was first set up in 1989, you will get a pretty comprehensive take on the mind-boggling variety of artwork offered

by those galleries who can afford to advertise in it. Many of the articles are also showcases for newly discovered work. *Raw Vision* does not claim to be devoted exclusively to Outsider Art, and its editor John Maizels has always adopted a generous and eclectic perspective, so in some ways the magazine, besides documenting new discoveries, functions as something like a window onto the commercial world of Outsider Art and an illustration of the extent to which the field is being shaped by it.

Inevitably this can result in the promotion of second-class work, what Laurent Danchin calls:

> the multiplication of a false Art Brut – art of recuperation, pseudo-infantile illustration or so-called 'singulier' art – which is in the contemporary air and with which it can easily be confused. Often clever, with elaborate graphics, even when it is autodidact, this art, using old tools, flotsam, natural elements, bits of dismantled machines or cars, is often practised by canny professionals and it rarely has the 'soul' that gives inspired creators their force.[15]

I would not blame *Raw Vision* for this: their aim is to provide a panoramic picture of what is now going on in and around the field of Outsider Art, without passing judgement upon it. But the contrast with the early days of *Art Brut*, when the discovery and collection of extraordinary new works was almost entirely insulated from commercial promotion and speculation, is a striking one, and it is ironic that something that began on the very edge of the professional art world is now one of the most vivid examples of how that world behaves.

Naturally dealers, collectors, galleries and museums will carry on using the term 'Outsider' because the term carries the cachet that keeps them in business, and heated border disputes about what does or doesn't deserve the title will also continue. In a sense Outsider Art is like Surrealism, in that it defines itself on the one hand by positive appropriations, which are sometimes tantamount to kidnap, and on the other by exclusions and disqualifications;

this is another feature of the dynamics of controversy that I referred to earlier. But just as the Surrealism that has now been incorporated into advertisements and other mass-media imagery is a prostituted version of the original movement and its aims, so there is a real danger of something similar happening to Outsider Art once it becomes a plaything of the market. Hence some collections and galleries will effectively end up muddying the waters rather than tapping into the true wellspring of unauthorized creativity.

Of course remarkable and powerful works will continue to be discovered: some will have already been created within the time-bracket that encloses 'classic' *Art Brut* – say from the 1880s up to the 1930s – and so will have an historical claim to the title; but when it comes to work created more recently by people who will often have some awareness of the term, its bestowal is more problematic. There is then an obvious question as to how this affects their Outsider status, at least in terms of the original criteria for *Art Brut*. Perhaps a more important question than 'Is this, or is this not genuine Outsider Art?' is 'What actual difference does it make to give it that title?' It will be my contention that this is less and less a matter of the intrinsic creative or aesthetic qualities of the work itself and more and more something justified by the social circumstances under which it was created. As we shall see in chapter Six, certain institutions, whether they are focused on mental illness or disability, provide a ready-made context in which the isolation and difference associated with Outsiders acquires a kind of *appellation contrôlée,* a primitive guarantee that the art that emerges from them is a product of people whose alienation from the everyday world is authentic.

3
Art Brut and the Classic Period of Psychotic Art

Here I want to look at the nature of 'psychotic art' in its classic institutional phase (roughly between 1880 and 1950), and at the role it played in the initial phase of *Art Brut*. Although the preponderance of psychotic art in Dubuffet's early collection caused some problems, notably for André Breton, who objected to what he saw as an elision between self-taught art and psychotic art,[1] there were good reasons why this should have been the case. First of all, Dubuffet's picture of madness was one of a radical intransigence: 'Isn't the individualistic temperament, with its implied spirit of contradiction and antisocial stance, when pushed to a certain level, to be identified purely and simply with what is called madness, in certain cases at least, notably in the case of the artists dealt with by Art Brut?'[2] This is another take on the traditional relation between eccentricity and creativity. In a typically polemical move, already quoted, he went so far as to turn the traditional alliance between art and madness upside down and assert that all art should be called 'pathological', rather than just that made by asylum inmates. This is curiously similar to the line taken by the Nazis in their condemnation of 'degenerate' art, in which psychotic art and Modernist art were treated as equivalent, but Dubuffet was promoting psychotic art as art, rather than demoting modern art as little better than a psychiatric symptom. The madness he is talking about isn't to be identified with institutionalized psychopathology: I think he probably meant something more like the array of temporary 'madnesses' associated with art, and its capacity to disrupt the spectator's expectations. Nevertheless, he did tend to treat the institutionalized psychotic artist as an emblematic figure.

There were several reasons why psychotic art seemed a suitable source for *Art Brut*: its makers had already been officially branded as 'abnormal' and

were segregated from the rest of society; their work allegedly displayed the operation of compulsive, irrational processes that were in effect cut off from conscious control and therefore seemed to obey some kind of 'inner necessity'; and the poverty of available art materials forced many of them to resort to unorthodox techniques (wrapping paper, saliva, plant juice and even medicines, for example). In many ways the indifference and neglect characteristic of asylum life were thought of as functioning as a sort of insulation that protected the psychotic artist from outside influence: in effect, the mental loss of contact with external reality that was supposedly typical of psychosis and the physical loss of contact through institutional confinement reinforced one another. As we shall see, this isolation is not quite as straightforward as the myths of *Art Brut* might require. Furthermore, being cut off from the external world does not automatically mean that one is plunged into some kind of 'inner' or 'private' world instead: the relationship between the two is more complex and, as we have already seen, the whole concept of an 'inner world' is a problematic one.

The term 'psychotic art' refers to work made by psychiatric patients that could in some sense be called 'art'. It's worth going into its history a bit, because this will throw up many issues relevant to the preconceptions underlying our view of Outsider Art in general. Broadly speaking what I shall call its 'classic' period is historically bracketed between the closing decades of the nineteenth century, when the first collections of patient art were established and books began to be published trying to make sense of it in other than purely diagnostic terms,[3] and the period after the Second World War, when changes in psychiatric treatment, such as shorter hospital stays, the use of more sophisticated anti-psychotic medication and the provision of art therapy, diluted the conditions that made it possible for such work to meet the criteria for authentic *Art Brut*. This has substantially altered the supply of Outsider Art from asylums, if not effectively closed it off. Beyond these factual and historical issues, there is a cluster of theoretical assumptions entailed in the whole concept of 'psychotic art', and at the ways in which it once matched, but now no longer matches, myths and fantasies about the relation between madness and creativity.

Louis Wain, a grouping of 8 untitled works, all undated; gouache, chalk and coloured pencil on paper, *c*. 22.5 x 17.5 cm each. This sequence may look plausible, but it was put together by a psychiatrist, Dr Walter Maclay, with no regard to chronological order, and makes no allowance for creative invention.

The initial attraction of psychotic art was for psychiatrists who were eager to penetrate the seemingly closed world of dementia praecox (the pre-First World War version of what we now call schizophrenia). It was not just behavioural anomalies that led to such a diagnosis: there was also the apparent failure to communicate thoughts and feelings, or else their expression in strange and distorted form. Such patients typically appeared to be locked in a world of their own and cut off from external reality, so that their drawings or paintings seemed to offer a way of 'getting a picture' of their inner mental processes. The wish to get inside someone else's head via the images they have made is not peculiar to psychiatry: it is part of a whole complex of recurring collective fantasies about art and imagination. Suffice it to say for the moment that the assumption that psychotic art was compulsive or unconscious in its creation, and that it was associated with powerful

Oswald Tschirtner, copy of Dürer's *Melencolia I*, undated, pen on paper, *c.* 35 x 25 cm. Here is a lean and shrunk-down version of the image of Saturnine melancholy that dogs the myth of expansive artistic creativity.

hallucinations or delusions, often of a markedly visual nature, made it seem plausible that it directly mirrored a patient's mental processes.

But an additional reason for early psychiatric interest in psychotic art was a more strictly diagnostic one: if distortions in the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of language could be treated as symptomatic indications of underlying thought disorder, then surely there were equivalent rules governing the 'proper' use of the formal language of art, in particular the representation of the human body, that could serve the same purpose. Such assumptions are still the basis for many current psychiatric 'projective' tests (for example, the 'Draw A Person' test).[4] Likewise, distortions apparent in their depiction of the human body were, and still are, seen from a strictly symptomatic perspective, ignoring both the clumsiness of the untrained and the possibility of play or irony.[5] Most notoriously, an undated selection of Louis Wain's cat images is frequently to be found in psychiatric textbooks illustrating the gradual disruption of representation, supposedly symptomatic of corresponding distortions of perception.

Similar reasoning led more recently to a patient's inability to copy a target image being seen purely in terms of deficit: in the cases of Oswald Tschirtner and Johann Hauser, for example, both of whom were subsequently recognized as Outsider artists, this was initially labelled 'apraxia' by Dr Leo Navratil, their psychiatrist. It is remarkable that few, if any, of these tests seem to allow for the possibility that, under certain circumstances – particularly where the drawing or painting was not the result of an administered test – an element of playfulness or irony might be present. For example, it is hard not to see Tschirtner's 'copy' of Dürer's famous *Melencolia I* engraving as a

transcription, eloquent in its minimal, yet faithful lines. This becomes all the more plausible when we know that he only drew in Dr Navratil's presence and at his request, often beginning by writing the suggested title at the top of his drawing. It's almost as if there is an ironic obedience being acted out; yet his exquisitely spare idiom is perfectly accurate in its own terms, almost as if the compactness and density of the Dürer had been translated into a skeletal or anorectic form.

In order to understand the original context for 'psychotic art' better, we have to remember that the psychiatric definition of 'madness', and the medical terminology associated with it, is itself a relatively recent invention.[6] Many writers have pointed out that before the middle of the eighteenth century 'madness' referred to a wide spectrum of unusual behaviour, including 'enthusiasm', possession and mania, as well as the various kinds of eccentricity associated with the artistic temperament.[7] The fact that, in the so-called Age of Reason, numerous poets and painters spent periods in insane asylums did not necessarily mean that their work was pathologized on that account. Satire and irony also played a prominent part both in their portrayal of madness and of the 'mad doctors' who sought to treat it. Is there any valid reason why some of the later inmates of asylums, even when they had no previous literary or artistic experience, should not have done the same? One issue involved here is the balance between the art in their work and those features that are supposedly symptomatic of their disorder, and this is an issue that will crop up repeatedly in this chapter.

The association of creative genius with madness has, as we have seen, a long and complex history, closely related to the cult of the melancholic temperament. But it is important to bear in mind that in this history madness is not always associated with collapse, deficit or failure: it can also involve various forms of surplus (as in the popular image of 'mania'), where the individual seems to possess – or be possessed by – powers or energies that are out of the ordinary. As Adolf Wölfli used to complain, referring to the demands of his prodigious artistic productivity: 'There's the work! You can't imagine how taxing it is to try not to forget anything. It would surely drive a

Adolf Wölfli, *Eisee=Hall. Reisen=Stadt*, 1911, pencil and colour crayon on newsprint, 70.4/71.3 x 99.5 cm. This is Wölfli at his most intensely concentrated, stitching together a dizzying variety of idioms; not disorder, but another, ungraspable, kind of order.

person crazy if he weren't already.'[8] It is true that psychotic art displays a wide range of expression, ranging from grandiose extravagance to obsessive repetition; but it certainly doesn't have a monopoly on these characteristics. Furthermore, as in the late nineteenth century the language of psychopathology spreads into areas outside the asylum (including, notoriously, the retrospective diagnosis of long-dead artists), its remit gradually blurs, and artworks are created that have many of psychotic art's stylistic features, but which are not the work of mental patients. In the twentieth century terms like 'obsessive' or 'schizoid' come to be applied as stylistic markers akin to 'gothic' or 'baroque', and no longer imply a strict diagnosis.

How far, then, does the surviving work of patient artists from this classic period bear out the picture of the isolated psychotic elaborating a private world of hallucination and delusion? Certainly there are some examples of works that were explicitly labelled 'hallucination' either by their creators or by asylum staff.[9] The concept of 'hallucination' itself is problematic, and is connected to the whole cluster of ideas about the nature of imagination, its relation to an 'inner world' and its alleged opposition to reality. One of the things that has to be questioned here is the widespread assumption in relation to madness of a lack of contact with the external world and a corresponding submersion in a supposedly subjective, almost solipsistic 'inner world'. I have already touched on some of the problems involved in our conception of 'inner worlds', and they raise similar issues to those involved in the philosophical notion of a 'private language'. Nevertheless, the idea that Outsider Art gives witness to a secret inner world that is unique to the individual artist, and that this is found in its purest form in psychotic art is still a potent one. Let's take a further look at some of the difficulties it involves.

For a start, even delusions or hallucinations need to have some connection with objective reality in order to register as such: for example, they are usually couched in terms of 'normal' perception (the nineteenth-century psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Esquirol's widely accepted definition of hallucination was of a perception that had no corresponding object in the external world), and they often use idioms (from political conspiracies or

religious persecution to invasions from outer space) that derive from the public domain. The use of such material may be largely passive or unthinking; it may simply be something that happens to be 'in the air' at the time, or it may be more deliberate or thoughtful, even if in an unorthodox way. Then there is the stock of memories from the patient's pre-internment life, many of which concern the outer world. More often there is an inextricable blend of facts and information from both the personal and the public domains with what are clearly the work of fantasy or delusion: a particularly striking example of this is Adolf Wölfli's autobiography, which starts off fairly close to the actual events, but soon takes off, first into imaginary globetrotting and then into a cosmic drama in which he is transformed into St Adolf II.

In other instances something actual in the outside world – an illustrated newspaper article, even a wallpaper pattern, or an accidental stain – acts as a trigger to provoke a particularly vivid visualization that could be called 'hallucinatory' or 'visionary'. In the context of psychiatric confinement fragments of the outside world, whether in the form of memories, both individual and collective (military campaigns, religious or political issues, and so on), or of more tangible souvenirs, such as newspapers, atlases, even letterheads, probably acquired a peculiar extra weight. The world of external reality – not just its visible commodities and buildings, but also representations of it in newspapers, journals and encyclopaedias – took on a strange (or estranged) new significance, almost as if seen down the wrong end of a telescope. It is as though the bottled messages were washed up on the castaway's island instead of the other way around, and from them he or she has to piece a world together. Hence psychotic art, like the *Art Brut* under whose banner some of it was collected, is by no means as insulated from the outside world as is sometimes claimed.

A final, related, possibility is that effects deriving from the ongoing work itself – blotches, drips, imprints and the like – may act as stimuli in the same way. One example is the series of drawings made by Carl Lange depicting a variety of images deriving from the insole of a shoe: it's hard to tell how far these home-made Rorschach images were prompted by an actual insole, or

by the process of transcribing them, or indeed whether the whole conceit, flagged up as 'photographically verifiable', wasn't to some extent tongue-in-cheek. Similarly Jeanne Tripier's 'messages', ambiguously situated between mediumistic revelation and psychotic delusion, were often the result of her 'reading' blots and stains, with the relationship between writing and blots sometimes a two-way one. Strictly speaking some of this psychotic art might not qualify as *Art Brut*, but what links all these possibilities to Outsider Art is the widespread picture of the Outsider as someone living in a world of their own, articulating what is supposedly a private language.

It is a well-known characteristic of much visionary or 'hallucinatory' art, whether it is the infernal visions associated with the *Temptation of St Anthony*, or the 'paranoid' inventions of Salvador Dalí, that it appears transparent, as if it were a window giving onto the artist's original experience (or, in Dalí's case, recreating it for the viewer). In other words, like a good deal of figurative art, it deploys the conventions governing representation of the external world in order to give what is imaginary the appearance of external reality. Hence there is a kind of elision between what has been 'seen', whether with the inner or the outer eye, and what has been imagined or invented. It is impossible to tell, for example, to what extent the demonic imagery of Bosch or Grünewald is the result of some hallucinatory or visionary experience or of inspired artistic creation: all the more so because a whole pictorial tradition of such imagery rapidly evolved, based on copies and imitations. The same could be said of more modern artists, such as Dalí or Pavel Tchelitchew.

This figurative idiom is not confined to the world of art: even today it has unconsciously permeated what we think of as our inner worlds – the realms of fantasy, dream and even memory – to such an extent that we are hardly aware of them. In other words, these representational devices function as a bridge carrying an unconscious traffic between the worlds of internal and external reality, as a result of which the former is envisaged in much the same terms as the latter, even if it is sometimes framed by clouds or other cues to indicate an 'otherwordly' realm. Hence our dreams, fantasies and imaginings not only incorporate the memories of artworks we have seen,

Carl Lange, *The photographically verifiable, interleaved miraculous images, revealing a fifteen-year-old crime, in the insole of the victim's shoe*, *c*. 1900, pencil on paper, 51.2 x 65.2 cm. The title should alert us to the possibility that this isn't a simple illustration: apart from anything else, the drawing process itself must have made its own contribution.

Jeanne Tripier, *Untitled*, 1937, ink on paper, approx. 41 x 20 cm. Hovering on the edge of legibility, this is as much a painted as a written message.

but also construct their own figures and scenes in the light of the artistic tradition they embody.[10] In many ways much classic psychotic art that seems to traffic with the world of hallucination or powerful visual fantasy still remains indebted to this tradition, and hence did not often qualify as *Art Brut* in Dubuffet's eyes (see chapter Two), though something like it can be found in some Outsider Art (Chris Hipkiss or Vonn Stropp, for example).

There is often a paradoxical discrepancy between the apparent immediacy of a hallucinatory picture and the painstaking labour that was entailed in realizing it. It is also likely that in some cases the 'vision' results from something that occurred during the painting process. But the assumption is often made in relation to psychotic art that because of the overpowering nature of the psychotic hallucination this element of invention is almost entirely absent. In fact 'hallucination', with its overwhelming visual emphasis, is only one way of conveying a 'psychotic' experience in art: other ways may involve the dislocation of form and space, or even more jarring or disrupted handling that has to do with the disconcerting capacity of art to break through the crust of habit (see chapter One). A similar effect is achieved by some 'psychedelic' art, in which the recognizable outlines of objects seem to melt or disintegrate. It is, however, important to remember that some 'psychotic art' is made after the actual psychotic experience it appears to convey so vividly: Valerie Potter, for example, worked very carefully on graph paper with pencil outlines subsequently inked over and then coloured in with acrylic gouache, to create pictures that powerfully evoke the convulsive imagery of a psychotic experience.

Nevertheless it is still worth asking what might be going on when psychotic art questions these ways of representing the imaginary, or seems to bend or twist them. Again, it is an open question how far these departures are conscious challenges to these complex conventions, or how far they are the tip of an iceberg of experiences that simply cannot be fitted into them. The authority of conventional modes of representation – perspective, proportion, accuracy of detail, and the like – was widespread in late nineteenth-century culture, and was reinforced in art schools and academies. Even before they

Valerie Potter, *Untitled*, 1981, ink and acrylic gouache on paper, approx 59 x 84 cm. Here the artist depicts a session of ECT: spot the three-pin plug!

were admitted to hospital, many patients would have experienced this in their professional training as draughtsmen, graphic artists or even as part of the set of artistic accomplishments expected of well-educated people. In the strangely altered circumstances of psychiatric detention this authority must often have felt like an accomplice of the psychiatric tyranny to which they were subject. Since the threat of indefinite confinement was very real, it would have been ill-advised to protest too vehemently against the regime (though some patients did, in writing and in pictures). It is not difficult to imagine that patient artists, just like artists under an oppressive political regime, found a variety of ways to register surreptitious protests against 'the system', many of which would have been undetectable on account of their irony.

One obvious example is the frequent use of maps and architectural or mechanical plans, not to mention other less easily categorizable diagrams. Here there is often a paradoxical combination of sophisticated graphic techniques with arcane, impenetrable symbols. It is tempting to see such works as simply illustrating thought processes that can be assigned to paranoid or obsessional delusion, but there is also the possibility that there may be an element of playful or ironic manipulation in them. Several of the patients who featured in Prinzhorn's book on psychotic art had professional backgrounds, either as artists or as draughtsmen, and would therefore have been familiar with these conventions. I can also imagine the process of entering into such diagrammatic or cartographic idioms acquiring its own momentum, so that one becomes caught up in it. Another feature of some psychotic art is the use of contemporary scientific and industrial innovations. Some, such as motor cars or aeroplanes, are quite literally incorporated in the form of collages (Wölfli), others are simply reproduced. Here, too, there might be some peculiar reciprocal resonance between the allegedly 'private' world of the psychotic and souvenirs or anticipations from the outside world (there is a detailed study of such echoes in Daniel-Paul Schreber's work).[11]

More interesting is the reference to such recently invented devices as wireless or x-rays. From a contemporary psychoanalytic perspective, these

were seen as examples of how 'influencing machines' formed a symptomatic ingredient of psychotic thinking;[12] yet they can also be seen as tapping into contemporary metaphors for invisible, psychological processes.[13] Just as today mental processes are often figured in cybernetic terms, so such newly discovered forms of action at a distance lent themselves to the same purpose. Of course there is still an important difference between a delirious system of thought borrowing such idioms unconsciously and something like a creative or playful use of them: all I am saying is that just because a patient has been diagnosed psychotic there is no reason to assume that the former is inevitably the case. It is often hard to tell, purely on the basis of the work itself, the extent to which something is intended as pastiche or irony, but it would be short-sighted to rule this out. There is also the temptation to see Outsiders as governed by essentially similar and equally ineluctable obsessions, and thus to underestimate the element of irony or satire in their work.

In some cases of psychotic art the juxtaposition of different modes amounts to a silent challenge to pictorial orthodoxy. The anonymous artist known as 'The French Traveller' clearly knew conventional decorative motifs all too well, perhaps through his profession, but alongside them he introduces a more radical and riotous ornamental proliferation, which even includes warped versions of the other, more chintzy, motifs. The contradiction is flagrant, and amounts to a collision that is surely intentional. It is, so to speak, a first cousin to Louis Wain's famous sequence of cat pictures, but here the invasion of decorative motifs is immediate rather than gradual. The work is like a perfect illustration of the difference between *Art Brut* and conventional art.

The first major collections of asylum art were made at a time when the questioning of artistic conventions by Modernism had not yet filtered into psychiatric awareness. Of all the writers in this field, Prinzhorn probably had the most sophisticated acquaintance with avant-garde art; indeed a few psychiatrists were rash enough to slap pathological labels on some Modernist artists, such as Cézanne or Picasso. However it is possible, as I suggested earlier, that some of these patient-artists, because of the dual function of

representational conventions – as necessary to being properly understood and demonstrating contact with external reality – found themselves at odds with them in ways not dissimilar from Modernist artists. Today this tension may have slackened because the authority of these conventions has shrunk, and it may no longer be relevant to Outsider Art.

What did the 'art' in 'psychotic art' mean in this context, bearing in mind that the prevailing artistic taste among many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts was fairly conventional (this was notoriously true of Freud)? Obviously, 'art' meant something that, in spite of the circumstances of mental illness, still had some aesthetic quality to it; but it also covered whatever didn't fit into any other category – a curiosity, as we saw in the last chapter, something with an obscure or perverse inventiveness about it, or something with an unusual level of expressivity. Perhaps using the term 'art' was also an expression of sympathy for the human sufferer, a wish to compensate for the otherwise disqualifying effect of confinement. But 'art' also suggests something that bears the personal stamp of its maker, that can be seen as some form of 'self-expression', so that conferring the title 'art' implied that the psychotic artist might have had some degree of responsibility for their creation, even if it was also governed by implacable formal 'laws'.

There is a tension here between the wish to see such work as an individual creation, despite the depersonalizing effects both of 'mental illness' itself and of the 'total institution' housing it, and the tendency to see it in terms of the laws of an 'instinctual' or 'unconscious' form-creation of which the patient-artists themselves are unaware. Psychiatric perspectives on psychotic art tended to tread an uneasy tightrope between saluting its creative and aesthetic qualities and attributing these to the working of instinctual or unconscious processes. Such processes must, especially when they are identified with the forms to which they give rise, appear somewhat anonymous: for example Walter Morgenthaler, in his pioneering study of Adolf Wölfli, wrote: 'Wölfli never created in accordance with an ideal, but entirely in response to his instincts. He doesn't know the laws by which he works, but he obeys them unreservedly.'[14] His illness exposed 'fundamental

elements' similar to those deliberately sought after by modern artists: 'These form elements are unrefined and clumsy, to be sure, but all the more original.'[15] No doubt Morgenthaler's perception of originality, in 1921, was fairly indiscriminate; but the problem remains how original self-expression can be reconciled with these fundamentals. The wish to anchor psychotic art in some scientific model of 'fundamental creative form constants' survived well into the mid-twentieth century.[16]

But this question of the coexistence of a recognizably personal stamp and graphic processes that are governed by impersonal 'laws' is certainly not peculiar to psychotic art: it is a persistent current in modern art. Some Modernist movements, such as Dadaism, tried to avoid the traditional focus on individuality and to prefer the anonymous and the elementary: Hans Arp's work is a good example of how this contradiction is played out. Others, such as Surrealism and, later, Abstract Expressionism, experimented with various forms of automatism in ways that brought up similar tensions between the impersonal and the individual. Similar issues about the relation between surrendering conscious control and the survival of some idiosyncratic 'signature' also occur in psychedelic art (in Henri Michaux's mescaline drawings, for example). Interestingly, in some instances of Surrealist automatic drawing (in the work of Masson, for example) there is also a slippage between representational and abstract or calligraphic motifs: this is something that is also characteristic of doodles, which can be seen as its poor relation.

It must be obvious by now that the differences between psychotic art and conventional art can run deeper than the representation, in one form or another, of supposedly psychotic hallucinations or delusions. We have just been exploring a territory in between the figurative and the non-figurative, in which there is also an elision between the voluntary and the involuntary, one in which the spectator is often deprived of recognizable landmarks with the help of which they might identify the subject of the work or the intentions of the artist who made it. Just as Dubuffet considered that much psychotic art was too tainted by convention to qualify as genuine *Art Brut*, so he believed that there was no fundamental distinction between the mental mechanisms

behind the more inspired forms of psychotic art and those involved in any other form of art that was authentically creative. He thought that what was involved in genuine creativity was

> a mental world which the operator was placed inside of, rather than face to face with it, and which surrounded him on all sides. The representation of such a world, pullulating and shifting, governed by mental associations rather than visual data, required keys of a quite other sort than perspective.[17]

Hence there is an ambiguity and elision between forms, since what determines them is mental (or I would say imaginary) rather than perceptual, and this 'mental' is far more complex than any popular notion of vision or hallucination allows.

I have already mentioned the deeply disturbing, as well as exciting, effects of this kind of art. There is an echo of this in Anton Ehrenzweig's concept of 'inarticulate form': the kind of informal, spontaneously made marks that often appear in the background of conventional work, but which are forgrounded in Abstract Expressionist painting, for example. He believed that beneath the superficial chaos of this spontaneous facture there was a 'hidden order' that the conscious mind was unable to recognize, and that this could not be reproduced deliberately.[18] In some psychotic art in the Collection de l'Art Brut we can see a number of ways in which conventional structures are undermined or dissolved: in Eugene Gabritschevsky's work, or in the way Jeanne Tripier often dissolved texts or images into suggestive 'blots' (using a homemade mixture of hairdye, nail varnish and the like). In these and other similar examples there is something akin to the divinatory scrying of suggestive surfaces: scenes are dissolved and other scenes substituted, so there is often a shift both away from representation and back towards it. Again, the fact that these ways of 'seeing things' resemble hallucination does not mean that they have to be symptoms of psychosis: such 'double vision' is also an art-historical phenomenon.[19]

Eugene Gabritschevsky, *Untitled*, *c*. 1940, gouache on paper, approx. 42 x 26 cm. Like Victor Hugo and others, the artist uses blots as his starting-point; where do the figures that inhabit them come from?

What we are dealing with here is a 'madness' that is inherent in the art-making process itself: amongst other things, this involves the dissolution of the everyday boundary between internal and external reality, the animation of materials and the feeling that the work is taking control of itself. In a different context, all of these are regarded with suspicion, if not seen as symptomatic, by psychiatry (and later by psychoanalysis), and perhaps this is what Dubuffet had in mind when he asserted that all art-making should be considered 'pathological'. However, these experiences are one of the main reasons why artists make art, and indeed why spectators enjoy it: amongst other things because it offers a release from everyday functional distinctions. 'Enjoy' is perhaps the wrong word, because such experiences can be profoundly unsettling, as well as exciting. Clearly there is an area of overlap between such local 'madness' and the full-blown attack of mental illness. There might be a risk that one will translate into the other; but the traffic can also flow in the opposite direction.

This brings us back to the issue of how typical psychotic art is of the psychotic in general. In the period for which we have most evidence, say the first half of the twentieth century, most psychotic patients did not make anything that could conceivably be called 'art': of those that did (less than 2 per cent, according to Prinzhorn) only a tiny minority produced anything of real artistic interest. So how far can their work be taken as representative or typical of psychotic thinking? A key problem here remains the question of how far such departures from the artistic norm are a result of failure or of refusal. We have already seen how, for Prinzhorn, there were many parallels between the modern avant-garde artist and the schizophrenic – the turning away from outward appearances, the need to present an interior (psychic) world, the preoccupation with abstract or decorative forms, and so on – but the determining difference was that the modern artist did this through choice, whereas the schizophrenic was under some obscure compulsion. However, as I have suggested, this distinction doesn't really stand up to close scrutiny.

If the representational and symbolic conventions from which psychotic art departed were still relatively well established in the early decades of the

twentieth century, they soon became far less so, and the grounds they seemed to provide for making psychiatric diagnoses were correspondingly weakened. This situation was further complicated by many artists' growing interest in psychotic art, an interest that expanded steadily as a result of the first publications in the field, most notably Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published in 1922. This book exerted a powerful, subterranean influence on many artists (even those who could not read the original German), as well as on collectors such as Paul Eluard and, later, Dubuffet himself. Its pictorial impact was all the more dramatic because his approach was in terms of an analysis of the style of psychotic art rather than its content: this had the effect of keeping its meaning at one remove, and focusing on its enigmatic and idiosyncratic qualities. His book became something like the prospectus for an as yet uncharted territory, rich in astonishing images: there is a clear lineage connecting this early, underground cultural influence with the place of psychotic art in Dubuffet's collection.

Dubuffet maintained that the psychiatric diagnosis of madness was a repressive reaction to vividly eccentric and antisocial behaviour, which seemed to him prototypical of what the attitude of a truly 'raw' creative individual should be. He formed friendships with several such artists (notably Aloïse) and his admiration for their work must have meant a good deal to some of them. However, his attitude to psychotic art was ambiguous: while he maintained that the creative mechanisms at work were just the same as in more normal people,[20] he did admit that psychosis might amplify them. Certainly the way in which such work was presented in the *Cahiers de l'Art Brut* (which in effect began in 1948) was respectful, both of the art and of the person who created it: a minimum of factual information was to be provided, with little or no interpretation, and where possible the artists should be allowed to speak for themselves. Nevertheless, he was interested in the life story of the artist not only because it confirmed their maverick status (a good example is the correspondence between him and Victor Musgrave about Scottie Wilson, in which Dubuffet is clearly anxious to establish that Scottie was illiterate), but also because of the light it might throw on their

creative process. Here again we see the way in which *Art Brut* work and its background are inextricably entangled.

We have seen that what I have called 'classic' psychotic art, along with the contemporary Spiritualist art that resembled it in being the product of dictation or inner necessity, functioned in many ways as the Gold Standard for *Art Brut*. The changed circumstances that mean it has become harder to find – the closure of large psychiatric hospitals and the introduction of more specific forms of medication, for example – are concrete versions of changes that have affected the whole field of *Art Brut*. The stylistic markers that distinguished it from mainstream art, and which were once relatively clear, have become blurred. In the next chapter I shall look at what is now happening to the art produced by some psychiatric patients and its implications for Outsider Art.

4
Psychotic Art Today and Outsider Art

What is the situation regarding psychotic art now, half a century later, and how does this impact on Outsider Art? Changes in the treatment of the mentally ill, principally the closure of many asylums in which patients might spend half their lives, and the introduction of more specific anti-psychotic medication – and also, some have maintained, the introduction of Art Therapy – have severed the connections between long-term institutionalization and psychotic art. Perhaps the quasi-monastic conditions of traditional asylum life were in some ways favourable to the elaboration of substantial bodies of artwork. They may sometimes have offered what Michel Thévoz calls 'the secondary gain from internment'.[1] The current situation of many 'mental health service users' in the community may be a more lonely one, but it is less insulated from the outside world. In addition, radio, television, personal music players and the internet often serve as a substitute contact with reality, ironically giving isolated people the illusion that they are plugged into a manic stream of pre-programmed information and entertainment. How far this is different from the interwar years when such media were less invasive is hard to determine. In some of the modern institutional contexts I shall be referring to – particularly those for the handicapped – brand names, logos and characters from popular fiction, such as Batman, may figure frequently, as well as cultural stereotypes such as 'homos'; but the purposes they serve may be obscure or idiosyncratic. Here again the point is that Outsiders may not be as completely cut off from mainstream culture as we might like to imagine.

Nevertheless there are still some situations in which what used to be called 'psychotic art' is protected and even encouraged: the 'House of Artists' set up at Gugging in Klosterneuburg, Austria, by Dr Johann Feilacher in 1986

is one, and the 'Living Museum' founded by Bolek Greczynski and Dr Janos Marton in 1983 in Creedmoor state mental hospital in Queens, New York, is another. In both places patient artists are provided with studio space and good quality art materials as well as technical assistance, and their work is supported and valued. Contact with the public is encouraged, and the work is also exhibited in commercial galleries. But although both treat the patients as artists first and foremost, there are important differences between ways in which each is run, and correspondingly divergent relationships with the world of Outsider Art. Gugging's artists are all inpatients, and live in the facility: they look very much like old-fashioned mental patients. The Living Museum, on the other hand, has a mixture of in- and outpatients who don't look obviously different from the rest of us.

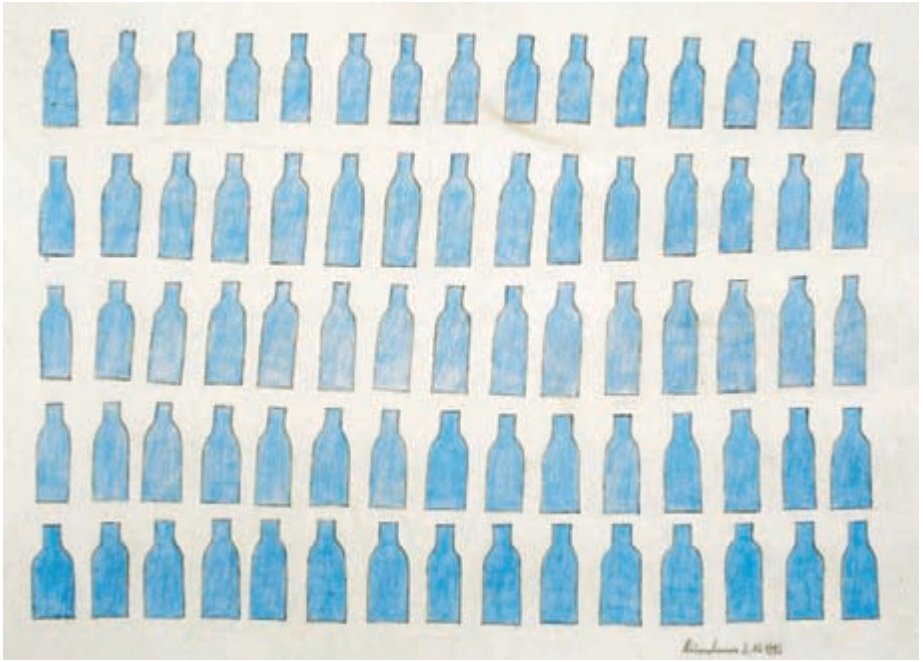
A special studio was first set up at Gugging in 1981 by Dr Leo Navratil as a Centre for Art Psychotherapy. He had already been 'drawing with his talented patients' for nearly twenty years.[2] Although Navratil had close friendships with many of the patients, his primary interest was still in the relation between psychosis and creativity from a psychiatric perspective, and in refining their diagnoses: this included, for example, giving them photos of works of art to copy, as a test.[3] In fact both Tschirtner and Hauser, who were later recognized as Outsider artists, were diagnosed by him as suffering from 'apraxia' on this basis: this sits rather uneasily with his recognition of their artistic talent. Take, for example, Tschirtner's version of the famous Dürer engraving, *Melencolia I*: all the main features of the composition have been faithfully copied, but the sombre density of the engraving has been translated into a spare, almost anorectic idiom. Tschirtner's meek silence and his refusal to draw except in his doctor's presence serve to underline (so to speak) the ironic economy of his transcription.

It may be that Navratil felt torn between his perspective as a psychiatrist and a more generous view of his patient's work as art with a real value of its own. The first exhibition resulting in sales was as early as 1970, but since then Gugging artists have enjoyed increasing exposure to the commercial art market, and their work now commands high prices,

something that Navratil believed enhanced their self-esteem and therefore constituted a form of 'art therapy'. It's clear that for him these were patient-artists in the old-fashioned sense: according to him, they all suffered from serious mental disorders, in many cases aggravated by low intelligence caused by brain damage in early childhood.[4]

Despite this there are a number of factors that make their relation to Outsider Art problematic. The first is one common to a great many studios specially set up for people with a mental or physical disadvantage: however worthy the project may be in human terms, these patients are positively solicited to make art, and may even be under some pressure, more or less subtle, to do so. Artworks are made that would not otherwise have been made, and that could sometimes be seen as artefacts of the institution. Furthermore, not only do the artists receive visits from interested parties, in effect being put on show alongside their work, but they inevitably acquire some familiarity with the art world and even attend private views. All of this may be admirable from a human point of view, but it does jeopardize their status as Outsiders; or, rather, it reinforces the extent to which this has become an institutionalized phenomenon. As a thought experiment, imagine what might have happened to Adolf Wölfli if he had been in such an environment (after all, according to Morgenthaler, he was used to making 'bread-and-butter' art for visitors): he would probably still have created at a prodigious rate, but I suspect that the intensity and peculiarity of his work might have suffered.

Once Feilacher took over as director in 1986, the Centre was renamed the 'House of Artists'. Unlike his predecessor, Feilacher claims that the art can be separated from the patient's illness, which 'is a matter of private concern'.[5] This is a significant shift: it is as if they were no longer patient-artists, but artist-patients, or even artists on the same footing as others. There are certainly problems with his assertion that the artwork produced there is art like any other: 'By purchasing pieces from Gugging artists, museums were admitting that the works were of equal quality to those by artists without a psychiatr[ic] diagnosis.'[6] A good deal depends on what 'quality' means here: the mere fact that museums have purchased work is



Heinrich Reisenbauer, *Flaschen*, 1998, pencil and colour on paper, 72.6 x 101.8 cm. All Reisenbauer's work consists of simple, near-identical, figures repeated over the entire page. He himself often adopts similarly frozen postures.

not in itself enough to disconnect the work from its psychiatric context. It is also dangerous to let the market become the principal index of a work's artistic value: the most conspicuous examples of this are where the huge prices paid for recent artwork are equated with its importance or significance.

Feilacher's assertion is echoed by the claim made by some dealers and collectors (notably Phyllis Kind), that they are simply interested in the creative and artistic qualities of the work, not in its provenance or in the life history of the artist who made it. I do not believe this, and no one to my knowledge has yet made the experiment of exhibiting such work alongside other work 'blind' in order to prove that there is no obviously perceptible difference between the two. In fact, as we have already seen, the story behind the work is not only an intrinsic part of its 'authenticity', but a source of psychological interest in its own right. There is also no denying the fact that the Gugging artists have been specially selected; but it is uncertain how much this has to do with their Outsider status. Not all psychotic art is necessarily remarkable as art, let alone as *Art Brut* or Outsider Art, and it would be interesting to have been able to compare their work with that produced elsewhere in the hospital, but that is now no longer possible. While some of the Gugging artists (Hauser, Tschirtner or Walla, for example) have a strong enough character to be considered as *Art Brut*, this is more debatable in other cases: Heinrich Reisenbauer's repetitive images may bear a resemblance to post-Modernist serial work, for example, but they do not have the genuine feel of *Art Brut*. The ethical issues surrounding the exhibition of a patient's art during their lifetime are highly problematic, but I want to make it clear that in querying the *Art Brut* status of some of this work I am not denying the value for the individual patient of making it: it is simply that some of the previously definitive conditions for *Art Brut* 'authenticity' no longer apply.

Ironically at the very moment that the psychiatric hospital to which it was originally attached is being demolished the Centre has now been renamed Art/Brut Center, Gugging. The 'Brut' seems to suggest that, in spite of the publicity and commercial orientation of the new centre (which has superb new studios and galleries, and systematic documentation of every work

produced), the authentic *Art Brut* (not just Outsider) character of the artists' work has been preserved. I suggest that the institution itself now provides a kind of *appelation contrôlée* for this. But in some ways the House of Artists is a curiously old-fashioned set-up, with the patient-artists almost as much on show as their artwork, despite the claims that it is the work alone that matters. Almost all of them are now quite elderly, and it is not clear where or how replacements are going to be recruited: it is almost as if Gugging has become a museum of itself.

This is not, however, the case with the Living Museum in Creedmoor, even though it too is housed in a shrinking psychiatric hospital. Its director, Janos Marton, believes that 'people with mental illness are blessed with special gifts in the arts'.[7] He seeks to give patients a new identity as 'crazy artists' instead of just crazy patients. He claims that their segregation from the normal world, the space and time this allows them to devote to their work, and their indifference to financial concerns, actually constitute a privileged situation, a genuine asylum from the responsibilities and distractions of the outside world. Furthermore, the freedom given allows them, in the words of his late collaborator Bolek Greczynski, to 'use your vulnerabilities as a weapon'. Again, while many artists do this, it acquires a particular edge here: the Living Museum has a refreshingly anarchic and anti-psychiatric ambiance (witness the gigantic waste bin filled with Creedmoor memos). But again, the question here is whether these individual instances of self-assertion make the work created Outsider Art.

Certainly the Living Museum has a remarkable atmosphere and artworks that are impressive in both quantity and quality are created there; but again the question must arise, in the light of Marton's claim about the special relationship between mental illness and creativity, of how typical this work is of the psychotic population in general. Certainly all the members of the Living Museum have serious psychological problems and are on medication. But, however laissez-faire the way in which it is run, there is evidently some kind of selection process involved. Also some of the artists already have some training or experience in the arts, and others are clearly aware of an art world

in which they could cut a figure. In this respect they are, of course, not so different from the patient-artists enshrined in Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. For Marton, too, as in a slightly different way for Dubuffet, these artists are no more – and no less – Outsiders than artists in the so-called normal world, because both share a similar 'madness', even if the patients are unable to escape from it: 'Modern art is mental illness. It is nothing else than breaking of the code.'[8] I understand this in the light of what I have already said about the peculiarity common to the originality of expression in modern art and to the deviance ascribed to 'psychotic' artworks, and which is also a feature of Outsider Art.

Once again we encounter the link between artistic creativity, mental disturbance and originality of expression. For Marton mental illness is in some ways a privileged position, and yet he maintains that 'There is no common denominator among these artists. There is no common style defined by mental illness, by the brutality of confinement, or by the hope of healing.'[9] It is not so easy to eliminate at one stroke both patient art and work created in the context of art therapy. One question here is the extent to which work created out of mental distress necessarily carries traces of that distress. Perhaps Marton believes that in so far as they are artists, his patients have transcended this, and it is certainly true that much of the work in the Living Museum does look like the kind of art to be found in the mainstream art world; but it is also true that some of it still has the feel of work produced by people with an unusual level of distress, or under compulsions that somehow transmit themselves via the work. The question still remains: does this in itself make it Outsider Art?

A comparable position is taken up by other workers in this field, such as John Holt, the founder of Artists In Mind (AIM), an organization that seeks to provide studio space and mentoring support for mental health service users who are artistically inclined. Here too the emphasis is on the quality of the art rather than on the psychological state of the artist. Like Marton, Holt believes that mental distress calls forth artistic creativity as part of an instinctive healing process.[10] There is still a question as to whether

it is the artistic process itself that is healing, or whether factors like the solidarity provided by other members of AIM and the possibility of reaching a wider audience through exhibitions have a therapeutic effect (as with Navratil's Art Psychotherapy Centre). Some of the art so produced does indeed 'look like any other art', that is to say work ranging from student level to that of artists who might be seen as professional, but some of it undoubtedly bears traces of the distress that prompted it. Again, for it to be called 'Outsider' the question is not whether or not it is 'good art' or whether it displays some kind of psychological eccentricity, but whether it stands sufficiently far outside the normal artistic parameters. Because of the eclectic and pluralistic character of contemporary art this is something that is getting harder and harder to determine on the basis of the work alone, and a good deal now depends upon the kind of institutional envelope within which it is created.

Institutions can be roughly divided into 'positive' ones that, whether they are art schools or special studios, seek to provide support and encouragement for creativity, and 'negative' ones such as prisons or psychiatric hospitals that effectively discourage it. Organizations like the Living Museum or AIM clearly belong to the first group, as, in a different way, do special studios for the handicapped. But discouragement and indifference are the soil on which *Art Brut* flourishes, and institutions that provide support and encouragement, however worthy their aims, risk producing a kind of ersatz *Art Brut*. Nevertheless both kinds of institution play a significant role in confirming artists as Outsiders: people who have been institutionalized, whether for psychosis or for severe learning difficulties, are thereby given a cachet that grants them an automatic Outsider status, in psychological or social terms at least, in so far as they have been officially excluded from mainstream society. At the same time, some of these 'positive' institutions, through their encouragement and solicitation of artwork, also undermine or alter the original criteria for Outsider Art. Again, I am not questioning the human value of such interventions, but rather asking what difference this makes to the ways in which we now apply the term 'Outsider'.

Michel Nedjar, *Untitled*, 1987, oil on paper, 50 x 65 cm. In both their imagery and style, these images hark back to an archaic, pre-historical and perhaps archetypal era.

The situation at Gugging is a good example. As we have just seen, the envelope of the psychiatric hospital remains, but within it there is the secondary institution of the House of Artists, which has now developed its own tradition and become recognized in the commercial art world. The art created there has many of the characteristics of classic patient art, but it often has those of Outsider Art as well: there is an overlap but not an identity between the two. There are even examples of actual collaboration between Gugging artists and artists from outside (most notably Arnulf Rainer, who also has an extensive collection of Outsider Art). In many ways these crossings of the boundaries are creative and provocative; but by the same token they are bound to raise questions about the relation between these more benign forms of institutionalization and Outsider Art. Now, under its new title of Art/Brut Center, Gugging is also a showcase for exhibitions of *Art Brut* work from elsewhere. Some of these have been of classic work from the *Art Brut* canon, but some are of work that occupies a no-man's-land on the edge of *Art Brut*, that could be called Outsider.

Michel Nedjar's retrospective there in 2008 was a spectacular show, but his work, while it has obvious affinities with *Art Brut*, illustrates some of the problems involved in giving it that title. Certainly Nedjar is self-taught, and he works obsessively, often using 'rough' materials (rags steeped in grimy and greasy potions, for example), and this would seem to qualify him as an Outsider at least. His work also uses an archaic, primeval idiom of mask-like faces or animal shapes, half sunk in a dense and grainy ground, that have a Palaeolithic resonance in their anonymity and in the relation between human and animal figures. His work also resembles tribal or ethnographic artefacts: some of the 'dolls' look like sacrificial offerings or fetishes. There are also echoes of some psychotic artists; but in all of this we may be encountering an archetypal realm that is common both to some psychotics and to some other artists, but that is not in itself 'psychotic'. On the other hand, like a number of other Outsiders (Albert Louden, for example), Nedjar has adjusted to becoming a successful artist: he travels widely, as well as attending private views, and his work is widely reproduced and sells for substantial sums.

'Chomo' (Roger Comeaux), detail from *The Village of Preludian Art*, *c*. 1988, mixed media. Chomo's domain utilizes painting, sculpture and installation, using a bewildering array of techniques and materials.

Perhaps his starting point may have been that of an Outsider, but he has now become a marginal figure both in that world and in the mainstream art world. What does it mean, to put him under the umbrella of *Art Brut*? Certainly on its own his work could be taken as such, but in this case the story behind it is bound to raise some doubts.

The more inventive forms of psychotic art once looked like the Gold Standard for *Art Brut*: they combined institutionalized alienation, mental disorders that invited fantasies about the exposure of an original and unadulterated creativity, and a peculiar distance from the outside art world. Almost all of these criteria have now been eroded or diluted. It was never accurate to claim that all psychotic art was *Brut*, and it is equally inaccurate to say that all art created by people with serious mental health difficulties is either Outsider Art or else to be seen as 'art like any other'. For example, as far as being seen as Outsider Art is concerned, is there any real difference between the work of the artist-patients in Gugging, or the crazy artists of the Living Museum, and the work of other eccentric or maverick artists? Surely the work itself can be situated along some kind of spectrum, with the more formulaic or 'traditional' psychotic art (say the work of Heinrich Reisenbauer or Johann Scheiböck) at one end, and the more inventive and free-range work (such as Nedjar or Hipkiss) at the other. But when the institutional context is taken into account, the balance shifts: in the end it still looks as if the definition of 'psychotic art' is that of work created by people with designated psychological disorders, and this gives them a ready-made Outsider status.

However, even this classification is now open to question. It is not just that people may have been unfairly diagnosed as psychotic, nor that the supply of traditional asylums is diminishing or anti-psychotic medication becoming more sophisticated; but that the whole basis for the connection between

Simon Lewty, *Asking the Way*, 1985, ink, crayon and acrylic on paper, 91.5 x 101.5 cm. Although this might look like 'psychotic art', it is the result of a convergence that has nothing to do with either disturbance or conscious influence.

psychiatric institutionalization and 'psychotic art' has progressively been weakened. Certainly some Outsider artists might, under different circumstances, have been diagnosed as having a disability or being mentally ill; but there are plenty of others, such as Armand Schulthess or Chomo, who are quite happily eccentric or antisocial. The stylistic benchmarks that once set – or seemed to set – psychotic art apart from conventional art have also been blurred. Work that looks 'psychotic' can no longer be reliably attributed to patients suffering from psychosis: there are artists whose work bears a strong stylistic resemblance to certain forms of psychotic art (Simon Lewty, for example) but who show no sign of mental illness. In addition, now that the classic masterpieces of psychotic art have become well known, along with other *Art Brut* works, there are also plenty of artists who have been influenced by them (members of the Cobra group, Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz, for example). Indeed this whole complex now appears on the curriculum of many art schools. As a result, a grey area has emerged in which it is extremely hard to tell what is a reflection of psychological disturbance, what is to some extent consciously contrived and what belongs to something that could be called a cultural unconscious.

Thus there are real grounds for suggesting that the term 'psychotic art' is historically bounded and belongs primarily to the history of psychiatry. As I have tried to show, the ways in which psychotic patients, in however fragmentary a way, recreated the outside world from within the asylum in their artworks are a kind of mirror image of the ways in which psychiatrists saw that work as embodying subjective distortions or a lack of contact with reality. For better or worse, that whole era is now disappearing over the horizon. It is as if the whole notion of psychotic art has been undermined less by anti-psychiatry than by a gradual process of cultural erosion, and this may mean that it can no longer serve as a principal plank in the platform for an *Art Brut* creativity that is utterly individual and original. Certainly the significant proportion of it that once constituted *Art Brut* is no longer reflected in catalogues or reviews of current Outsider Art. What has happened to psychotic art may also turn out to be the fate of *Art Brut* itself.

5
Doodling and Other Forms of Automatism

A significant proportion of Outsider Art consists of work that is neither straightforwardly representational nor completely non-representational: it seems to slither about on the edge between the figurative and the abstract, the 'decorative' and something that exceeds the merely ornamental. Something of the same graphic range occurs in doodling, which is engaged in by a large number of people, regardless of whether or not they have any other interest in 'art' and in this respect it has something in common with Outsider Art. The precursors of doodling, in the sense of marginal excursions, actually have a considerable history: they can be found in places as various as mediaeval manuscripts or eighteenth-century ledgers;[1] but these are manuscripts, and the situation of modern doodling is more likely to be in reaction to something printed (memos or agendas, for example). The usual contexts for doodling are meetings, phone conversations and other situations where the conscious mind is engaged on one task, leaving some other part of the mind (or maybe hand) to go where it wants to. In most such contexts, however, consciousness makes intermittent interventions or cancellations, which may in turn be incorporated into the doodle. Nevertheless, doodling has the connotation of being a kind of graphic truancy from the task in hand, or a secret and antisocial assertion of individuality, and again this is also a characteristic of much Outsider Art.

The doodle is a private and humble thing, to which little or no importance is attached: indeed, calling something a 'doodle' is a kind of camouflage for many people who are reluctant to put themselves forward as artists, a way of saying 'this isn't art, so don't pay it any serious attention'. Because it derives from a distracted state in which half-conscious or even automatic moves may be made, doodling has much in common with a good

deal of Outsider Art, especially mediumistic work, in which its typical mechanisms are released from normal constraints and supposedly quite automatic. This seems a particularly rich terrain in relation to Dubuffet's promotion of a popular, universal mode of creativity: all the more so since it doesn't depend on any kind of art training. However, doodling can also be seen as a diluted equivalent to something that can be found in more concentrated form in certain forms of modern art, from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism, where automatism is invoked. In André Masson's automatic drawings of the 1920s, or in Jackson Pollock's later drawings influenced by them, suggestions of landscape, body parts, faces and the like are thrown up but left in suspense,[2] and this elision is typical of the doodle. In a sense, doodling is like a miniature version both of the spectacular automatic productions to be found in Spiritualistic art (in Madge Gill or Laure Pigeon, for example), and of Pollock's famous 'drip paintings'.

In all its various forms, from the hesitant and literally marginal to the extravagant and amplified, doodling occupies a no-man's-land between habitual or unconscious forms and something more obstinate or aggressive. At one end there are 'mechanisms', repetitive graphic movements that can be systematized and analysed; in the middle we might put 'obsessional' permutations or graphic fugues that are the result of more intense elaboration, and at the other end are more free-wheeling improvisations and inventions. It's easy to imagine the more extensive forms of this being associated with trance-like or dissociated states of mind – though it's hard to tell whether these might be the cause or the effect of sustained doodling – and such states are characteristically oases of solitude, to which we withdraw, but in which we may get stuck. This association with a sort of graphic reverie and a dreamlike withdrawal of attention from the demands of external reality goes some way towards explaining why doodles, almost as soon as they were invented, were treated as unconscious indicators of a person's character, something halfway between graphological analysis and a projective test.[3]

Because doodling has attracted quite a lot of attention, and indeed seems to be currently undergoing something of a revival, it's worth looking at

Madge Gill, *Untitled*, undated, ink on paper, 75 x 56 cm. Unusually for Gill, this is almost abstract and some passages have begun to be inked over; but in other respects it is a superb example of meta-doodling.

Laure Pigeon, *Untitled*, 1958, ballpoint pen on paper, approx. 59 x 84 cm. The compacted texture and free-wheeling line here could only be achieved thanks to the type of pen used.

its history in order to tease out some issues that are central to a great deal of Outsider Art. The doodle can be said to be first cousin to the scribble. In the early decades of the twentieth century, before the notion of abstract or non-figurative art had been championed by Modernism, the term 'scribble' encompassed a wide range of mark-making that appeared random, unintentional or meaningless and therefore did not fit into any obvious category. Some of these scribbles, however, were much more structured than the careless connotations of the term would suggest. For example, Hans Prinzhorn, whose book on psychotic art is also a theory of the evolution of drawing, included as illustrations of 'scribbles' everything from the most chaotic and rudimentary tangles to quite sophisticated variations on a theme.[4] In fact the captions describe much the same kind of work as 'scribble', 'decorative scribble' or 'decorative drawing'. From one point of view, we are back in the territory of child art, where the earliest forms of mark-making shift backwards and forwards between an interest in the intrinsic quality of a stroke or mark, and the possibility that it might suggest something beyond itself.

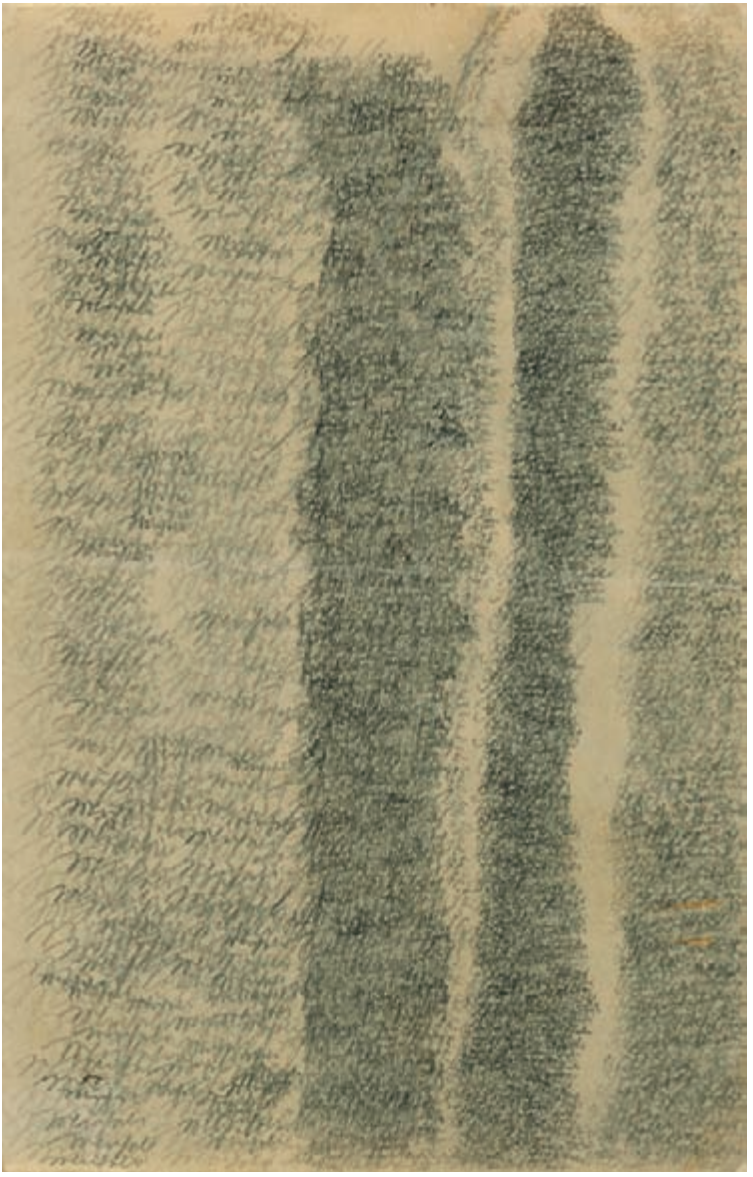
'Scribbling' occupies a pivotal place in Prinzhorn's model for the evolution of what he calls 'the configurative drive': it is its most fundamental form, and consists of 'unobjective, unordered scribbles',[5] by which he means that they are non-representational and purposeless. Some of them do indeed look like random, disorientated marks and here we encounter one of the poles between which the spectrum of scribbling might operate: that of occupying a space, of filling it in, even to the point of obliteration. Just as children repeat a word until it loses its common sense, so some of these 'scribbles' – in particular the poignant case of Emma Hauck's messages to her husband – become graphic mantras in which something is reiterated to the point of blanking itself out.

Ludwig Wilde, *Untitled*, undated drawing, 16.2 x 10.2 cm. Some of Wilde's drawings were apparently inspired by 'Persian' motifs; but they were classified by Prinzhorn as 'scribbles'.

The other pole of scribbling is more playful or prospective, something like Klee's 'taking a line for a walk', where there is a diffuse subliminal pleasure in letting the pen or pencil wander and then reacting to the result. This can be stretched to include working over a previously established passage of drawing, or even writing, sometimes dissolving it, as in some of Jeanne Tripier's artwork, where words and figures are, in a divinatory way, derived from blots.

In Prinzhorn's theory of pictorial expression, however, scribbling is still the most elementary, as yet unshaped, form of what he calls the 'configurative drive', which can subsequently take a number of different paths: imitation (representation), symbolism or ornament.[6] Each of these has its own set of conventions, and he indicates the various ways in which 'schizophrenic art' can be recognized by how it departs from these. Again, one difficulty here is how far we can judge whether these departures are the result of play or half-conscious tinkering, or are merely symptomatic of disturbance. Nevertheless, he says that 'Even the simplest scribble . . . is, as a manifestation of expressive gestures, the bearer of psychic components, and the whole sphere of psychic life lies as if in perspective behind the most insignificant form element.'[7] We can already see in this deceptively simple formulation a grey area between an individually recognizable expression that is automatic or unconscious, and one that is to some extent the result of some kind of express intentionality. This is an issue that is common to both certain kinds of Modernist art (Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism) and to Outsider Art.

The scribble seemed an obvious place in which to find graphic activity in its most automatic or instinctual forms. In many ways Prinzhorn's comment about psychotic art in general, including 'scribbles' – 'These works really emerged from autonomous personalities who carried out the mission



Emma Hauck, *Untitled*, undated, pencil on paper, 16.4 x 20.9 cm. Her desperately reiterated pleas – 'come, husband, come' – collapse writing into 'drawing', but the process of superinscription was probably as important to her as the final result.

Jeanne Tripier, *Untitled*, 1937, ink on paper, approx. 50 x 30 cm. Like Victor Hugo (who also engaged in Spiritualist séances), Tripier's messages are at once created and found.

of an anonymous force, who were independent of external reality, indebted to no one, and sufficient solely unto themselves'[8] – seems to match Dubuffet's picture of the *Art Brut* creator. But the growing acceptance of non-figurative imagery, and its connection to inner rather than outer reality, which were key features of Modernism at the very time that Prinzhorn was writing, was bound to change this perspective on the insignificant nature of scribbling. Despite his strong sympathy for contemporary Expressionist art, and the bold parallels he drew between avant-garde and schizophrenic artists in their withdrawal from external reality, he clearly had difficulty in understanding how what he called 'pure psychic qualities' could be expressed in art without resorting to representational or symbolic conventions. Yet this idea is implicit both in Modernist experiments in abstraction and in the popular craze for collecting doodles.

From an Outsider perspective, there are key elements in Modernism, such as Kandinsky's idea that abstraction was impelled by 'inner necessity' or the Dadaist emphasis on work created purely for the artist's own private purposes, that provide a justification for self-centred motives that could, when taken to extremes, be called narcissistic or even autistic. Doodling seems like a natural example of this, because of its association with escaping from responsibility, and it is significant that interest in it emerges at just the same historical moment (in the late 1920s) as these Modernist trends had begun to win acceptance. This coincidence between the avant-garde and the popular is somewhat ironic, because what was often rejected as meaningless posturing in the former was accepted without question in the latter. If the keys that were sometimes published to assist in interpreting doodles[9] seem to owe something to ways of reading contemporary abstraction, for example in terms of the built-in symbolic meaning of basic geometrical forms, I wonder if a similar kind of leakage could have affected some of the work gathered under the aegis of *Art Brut*. As with some of the motifs typical of psychotic art that we looked at in the previous chapter, there is the possibility that such things were 'in the air', without there having to be any conscious appropriation of them.

It seems that the psychological slant given to doodles was a result of psychoanalytic ideas leaking into popular currency, so that they came to be seen as expressions of an individual's unconscious preoccupations. Between the wars there was a noticeable vogue for books and articles subjecting doodles to interpretation in terms of the hidden traits of character they revealed. These samplings can be divided roughly into two main catchment areas: one consisted of celebrities – film stars, politicians and the like – samples of whose doodles were solicited and then given somewhat sycophantic interpretations. The other consisted of more popular trawls, usually conducted via newspapers, the most extensive of which was the nine thousand collected in 1938 and subjected to a more clinical reading.[10] Both attempted to establish a generalized 'grammar' of doodling, along lines influenced by graphology (incidentally, the philosopher and graphologist Ludwig Klages was an important influence on Prinzhorn).

In practice, the repertoire of significant forms in such analyses is a hybrid one, combining not only elements from graphology and the kinetic traces in marks, but from the figurative tradition previously mentioned, and from the symbolism of geometrical form, for example. All of these forms of inscription float in between the voluntary and the involuntary, the conscious and the unconscious (in its broadest sense). As with the analysis of children's drawings,[11] the concept of graphic automatism brings with it the question of how far the patterns it produces are universal or trans-cultural. But at the same time our cultural perspective is also slanted in favour of the individual signature. It's interesting that some attempts have been made in an ethnographic context to use doodling, or its equivalents, as a measure of individual expressivity within an artistic culture that imposes strong collective idioms.[12] These are based on the assumption that, given the opportunity, even members of tribal societies with strong collective pictorial traditions will produce spontaneous extracurricular drawings that resemble the doodles made in our culture, or at least that can be treated as such. Here we come across the same tension between the universal and the particular, the elementary and the idiosyncratic that can be found in Dubuffet's writing about authentic *Art Brut* forms of creativity.

Fascinating as the history of doodles and their interpretation is, here I only want to pick out a few common factors between them and more extensive forms of graphic automatism. Ordinary, common or garden doodling is held in check by a number of factors: the time available is often limited (a phone conversation), if done in public (at a meeting) there may be some reluctance to draw attention to it, and the surface available may be already partially occupied (by an agenda). If doodling is like a tethered form of play or an intermittent form of distraction, it is not difficult to imagine situations in which it could be given freer rein. The most dramatic example is drawing under the supposed dictation of spirits, in other words the 'mediumistic art' that constitutes a significant portion of Outsider Art. There is an obvious difference here between works that are governed by an ordering principle such as symmetry (Crépin, Lesage) and those that display an almost relentless fertility of invention (Lonné, Pigeon). Even though Lesage seems, under observation by members of the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris, to have displayed all the characteristics of automatic production (no planning, no revision), it is still hard to be certain that there wasn't some element of deliberation in his work because it looks so methodical. Lonné's work, on the other hand, looks as if it were the product of entirely unconscious processes; but this, too, may be equally misleading. The paradox is that both fluidity and rigidity could be ascribed to the same subliminal or automatic processes.

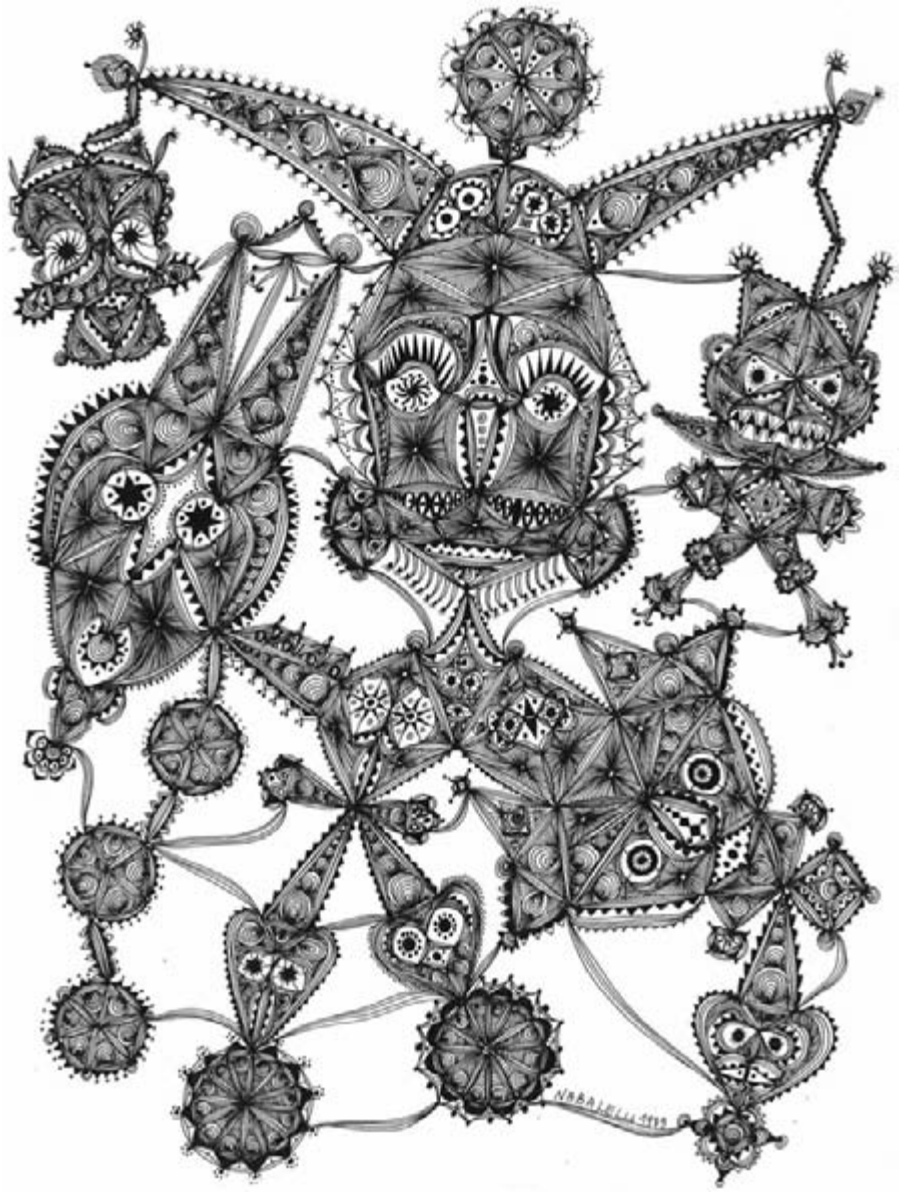
There is probably a psychological need to impose some kind of regular pattern or structure on what might otherwise feel chaotic: conversely, too rigid a system may call for something to disturb or contradict it. Artists of many persuasions are familiar with these dynamics: there is no reason to assume that they are the result of professional training, but they may involve some degree of semi-conscious intervention. There is another level, however, at which even the most spontaneous or chaotic-looking work may, as Anton Ehrenzweig pointed out, contain deep structures for which the conscious mind is not responsible.[13] I don't accept that these are to be identified with the 'fundamental form constants' that we saw were found in psychotic art;[14] in fact Ehrenzweig's 'inarticulate form' is in many ways incompatible with

the representational, physiognomic or decorative modes adopted by such constants which, like Prinzhorn's model before them, depend on conventional artistic categories. Interestingly, Ehrenzweig claimed that the conscious mind's bafflement by inarticulate form was responsible for some of the hostility with which modern art was met, and this connects with Dubuffet's description, mentioned earlier, of the ways in which authentic *Art Brut* breaks through the crust of convention.

However, it is undoubtedly true that certain features of absent-minded or dissociated drawing must be governed by a number of recognizable patterns. Some of these reflect manual or gestural habits: right-handed people, for example, usually find it easier to cross-hatch from top right to bottom left, and so this will tend to predominate in their work (as in some of Cy Twombly's large-scale scribblings, for example). Even elementary forms of mark-making may carry a psychological feedback effect: there might be some subliminal comfort in drawing repeated circles, some feeling of decision in making more rectangular shapes or grids, and so on. But the banality of most doodles shows how limited these are when, so to speak, left to their own devices. However, in situations where there is no limit to the doodle except the boundary of the paper on which it is being made, and where other external restraints are absent, we are faced with a qualitatively different phenomenon: both the variety of invention and the individual peculiarity of the work are intensified. I have called these 'meta-doodles'.[15] Examples include Emmanuel 'Le Calligraphe' Deriennic, Scottie Wilson, Richard Nie and Marc Lamy, as well as the Spiritualist artists already mentioned.

Nevertheless, a significant number of meta-doodlers testify to feeling as if they are in the grip of something beyond their control, to witnessing the work unfold, almost as if they had no active part in it, or were simply acting as transmitters. By the same token, the psychological accompaniments to this must also be more powerful. They include: a trance-like absorption or auto-hypnosis, a sense of the work being created under some form of dictation, and perhaps even a feeling of compulsion that is not always pleasant. Hence it is tempting to call such work 'automatic'. But this can mean a number of

Emmanuel 'Le Calligraphe' Deriennic, *Untitled*, undated, ink and pharmaceutical products on cardboard, 50 x 65 cm. This stunning exercise in ornamental excess is intensified by its small scale.

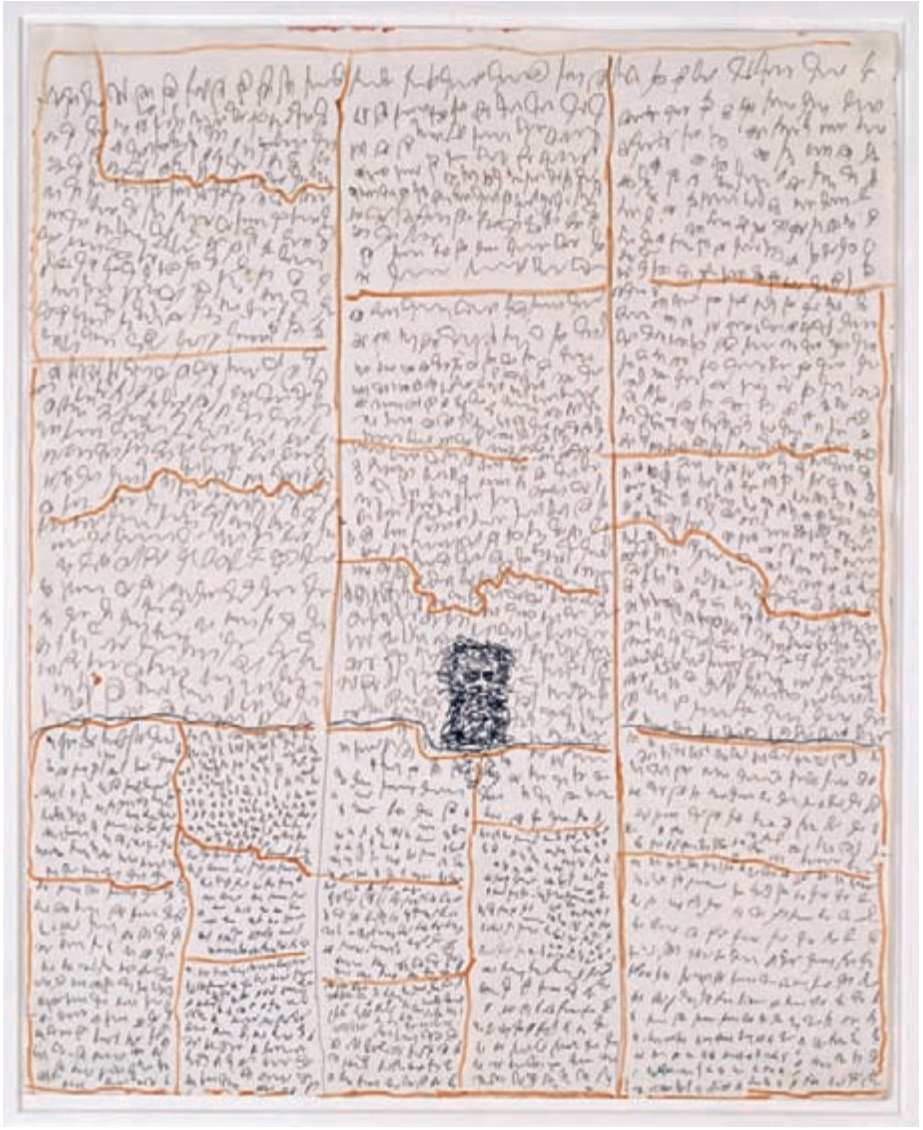


Marc Lamy, *Untitled*, 1988, ink on paper, 32 x 24 cm. Like Scottie Wilson, Lamy generates almost symmetrical images in which patterns become faces and vice versa.

very different things. In its more banal forms it refers to preformed sequences of behaviour that are supposed by psychology to derive entirely from instinctual or unconscious sources, or else to have been rendered subliminal through practice. This doesn't seem to leave much room for the originality of invention that is an essential feature of *Art Brut*. In other cases it refers to complex and effortless flows of thought or imagery that seem to be like distilled and dramatic forms of what is usually called artistic inspiration. As we have already seen, there are real questions as to where this might be coming from: the choice seems to be between something that is in some way intrinsic to the individual subject and something outside them.

An obvious example is drawings or painting created under Spiritualist inspiration. Writers on Outsider Art tend to bracket off the beliefs of mediumistic creators, or visionary artists such as J. B. Murray, or to see them as part of the picturesque background to the work rather than an intrinsic part of it. Michel Thévoz has argued that for Lesage and Lonné, for example, Spiritualism was a kind of alibi, something that gave a permission, otherwise not available to them, to make art.[16] It's certainly true that the envelope of most Spiritualistic art is far more like a naïf version of orthodox religion than the art associated with it is like mainstream art; and also, with the exception of Lesage who was an approved psychic painter, most Outsiders seem, despite the communal nature of Spiritualism, to have made their work in typical solitude. Once we allow for other sources of the creative impulse than those provided by psychology, psychiatry or psychoanalysis (for example the archetypal psyche), we are in an unknown territory. Spiritualist beliefs may be a misdirection, but they are perhaps no further from the mark than reductive scientific hypotheses.

When the Surrealists, for example, dived into the pool of automatic writing, it was to demonstrate what marvellous images could be generated by abandoning conscious control, by 'letting language speak', but they didn't want the results to be confused either with Spiritualist messages or with what psychoanalysis called the Unconscious. In many ways they preferred to enjoy the fruits of automatism without worrying too much about where they came



J. B. Murray, *Untitled*, *c*. 1980, ink and gouache on paper, 43 x 34 cm. These images were dictated in a 'script' that only the artist could read, and in some ways resemble children's drawings of 'writing'.

Scottie Wilson, *Untitled*, *c*. 1946, ink and crayon on paper, 43.2 x 27.4 cm. Wilson's drawings allegedly began with him doodling with a fountain pen, but they soon developed a life of their own.

from, and the same can be said of many enthusiasts for Outsider Art. If in verbal or written automatism what looks (or reads) like an uninhibited train of free-association or dictated thought may in fact be to a greater or lesser extent the result of language talking, rather than of the transcription of a pre-existing message, are there equivalents for this in the non-verbal realm of graphic form? Are there even parallels for the distinction between glossolalia, in which something that looks like language makes no obvious sense, and automatic verbal productions that do? Is 'abstract' or 'ornamental' doodling comparable to the former, and are the figurative or physiognomic forms to be found in many doodles comparable to the latter?

There are certainly examples (in Gaston Chaissac, Raphael Lonné or Richard Nie) of faces and figures embedded in, or emerging from, a matrix of indeterminate forms and textures: there are equivalents for this in some three-dimensional work, such as Cheval's Palais Idéal. To some extent this can be ascribed to an inbuilt human tendency to read such figures into a suitably suggestive background: this is called 'physiognomic perception' by psychologists and forms the basis for projective tests such as the Rorschach. But the ambiguous relation between ground and figure, between a realm of unlimited possibility and recognizable motifs, is also a reminder that the process of a work's elaboration makes an important contribution to the finished product, just as it does in doodling. Again, this is not something peculiar to Outsider artists: the world of ambiguous and overlapping forms that many artists explore is often an unsettling and disorientating one, and is a significant factor in what I call the 'madness' of art-making.

There is another relationship between verbal and pictorial elaboration, familiar to doodlers, where individual letters or passages of writing are disrupted by decorative or ornamental excursions, sometimes to the extent that they become almost illegible (as in some of Emmanuel's drawings), as if the graphic were taking its revenge on the authority of writing. To some extent this can also occur with faces or figures: they can be almost eclipsed by ornamental textures, or it can be hard to tell whether they are emerging from or being submerged by them. Some artists like to conjure up such presences,

but not to let them become too easily legible; on the other hand, others may even go out of their way to avoid the figurative, or end up being captured by the inherent dynamics of geometrical or ornamental forms. One could even see the insistent facial features in the obsessive doodles of someone like Scottie Wilson or Ted Gordon as a kind of framework or alibi for more abstract graphic motifs (interestingly, both have a marked penchant for symmetry).

If a great deal of doodling occupies an indeterminate area in between the ornamental and the figurative, there is a similar no-man's-land in the history of ornament itself, in which motifs that were originally figurative have been degraded into unrecognizable or 'abstract' elements: hence decoration or ornament can be said to have, even in art-historical terms, a latent or unconscious life of their own. Further than this, I wonder if there isn't a more extravagant realm of possibilities held in check by the conventional role of decoration and ornament that, once they have been released from their normal role as secondary features, can escape this captivity and run riot, or even result in a kind of 'madness' in which there is an uninhibited proliferation of forms. As a result, these potentialities can sometimes come to play the role of a third party in the work's creation. One important consequence of all this is to call into question the notion of visionary or hallucinatory experiences that are simply transcribed into pictorial form.

This brings up again the whole problem of the degree of control an artist exercises in creating 'automatic' work. I think that the boundary between 'spontaneous' and deliberate is much more permeable than is usually allowed for, and that subliminal or micro-decisions are made without the artist being fully conscious of them: as we have seen, this is a common characteristic of doodling. The notion of dictation, which seems to go along with the concept of automatism, implies that spontaneity and immediacy are necessary conditions for genuinely 'unconscious' production; but this, too, is an assumption that needs to be questioned: a work can display or even reproduce unconscious imagery without having to be produced unconsciously. In fact, some Outsider Art is the result of surrendering conscious choice to a

Le Voyageur Français, *Untitled*, *c*. 1914, gouache on paper, approx. 40 x 25 cm. There is an anarchic intensity to these decorative excursions, magnified by their small scale.

system that generates an array of mysterious signs, as with Charles Benefiel's coded number fields, so that obedience to a preconceived formula turns into something obsessive and irrational. In other cases, such as Eugene Andolsek, there is a combination of precision (the use of graph paper and set squares) with something that tugs against these rational methods.

In other cases, particularly with the work of people with severe learning disabilities such as Down's syndrome or autism, we can see something in between the automatic and the habitual at work. Here again we can presume that there is some comforting effect on the artist in reproducing repetitive marks or motifs, although the effect on the spectator may be more one of monotony. As we shall see in the next chapter, the resulting artwork, whatever its value in therapeutic terms for the individual who makes it, may have a borderline status as far as qualifying as Outsider Art is concerned.

So far I have been writing as if doodles were an unmistakable category; but where do we draw the line between meta-doodles and other kinds of drawing that might be categorized as Outsider? Of course many of the formal features of doodling I have touched on occur as passages within works that would not themselves be described as doodles. There is a parallel here with Anton Ehrenzweig's concept of 'inarticulate form', which also relates to Dubuffet's description of the unsettling effect of authentic art. This involves spontaneous, unpremeditated, highly ambiguous and informal marks that are something like an artist's handwriting, which usually appear in the background or margins of traditional art, but which are foregrounded in some modern art.[17] He pointed out the characteristic ways in which inarticulate form baffles the conscious mind, with its need for clearly identifiable Gestalt-formations; and this has a good deal in common with the doodle's slipping and sliding between figurative and decorative motifs. Interestingly, he also connects the indigestibility of inarticulate form with public hostility to works that embody it too lavishly: perhaps this is also something that applies to Outsider Art?

Rather than worrying about what does or does not qualify as a meta-doodle from a formal point of view, I prefer to invoke the state of mind involved: that no-man's-land between absent-minded distraction and being sucked into the work's machinery; the doodle's irresponsible way of creating an oasis of solitude or subjectivity against a public or social background that sometimes threatens to extinguish it. This too is a characteristic of Outsider Art: that what we most relish in it is the fantasy (not always born out by the available evidence) that it was created in an almost solipsistic ambiance. There is a paradoxical aspect to this: that what was created in such an isolated situation comes to have some value or meaning for others. But we shouldn't forget that this is also characteristic of a great deal of non-Outsider art. This is a motif in a good many creation myths, where the world comes into being as a result of a solitary, even auto-erotic, process of self-communion. The emergence of something out of nothing is at the core of artistic expression, and the risk of confronting that emptiness, that blank space, can feel very real to the artist.

Perhaps it is this image of the doodle, rather than any individual examples, that symbolizes something about how we look at Outsider Art in general: it is like the signal from a remote galaxy, reaching us across vast distances in space-time, maybe long after the galaxy that gave rise to it has imploded. Similarly the image of automatism, rather than its actual manifestations, is of some unknown compulsion to which the individual Outsider has to submit, or of some form of possession that takes him or her over. Such images form part of the mythological envelope surrounding our ideas about authentic artistic creativity that infiltrates our thinking about *Art Brut* or Outsider Art. Similar images of various modes of automatism, for example that of Jackson Pollock's 'drip' paintings, can also be found in modern art; but they take on a special intensity in the way we approach Outsider Art.

If doodling embodies an intensely subjective form of truancy from reality, then by the same token it is vulnerable to exposure: not just through the opportunistic modes of interpretation often applied to it, but in being shared with even the most intimate audience, let alone a gallery full of strangers. While many artists experience such misgivings about exhibiting or parting with their work, I know from personal experience that many Outsiders feel this even more acutely. It follows that there can be a kind of thinly disguised voyeurism or latent cruelty in the ways in which such art is rescued, kidnapped or simply stolen from the circumstances in which it was originally created. This does not just affect the artists themselves: it enters surreptitiously into our appreciation of it, and some of these issues will be the subject of the next chapter.

6
The Problematic Introduction of Outsider Art into the Wider Art World

We know how Dubuffet himself anticipated the effect that exposing *Art Brut* to the wider world of art would have: the inherent quality of the art would become adulterated and its solitary and eccentric character would be diluted. He didn't mention what effect this might have on the *Art Brut* creators themselves; but in the process of establishing and implementing the criteria for genuine *Art Brut* he had already had problems with individuals whose contact with the art world might have jeopardized their authenticity. One of the most celebrated examples was Gaston Chaissac, who was at first welcomed into the Collection de l'Art Brut, but was subsequently decanted into the 'Collection Annexe' (later to become *Invention Neuve*). It seems that Chaissac was encouraged in making his art as a result of a two-year association, between 1937 and 1939, with the German artist Otto Freundlich.[1] Ten years later, at the time Dubuffet 'discovered' him, Chaissac was clearly familiar with Picasso's work and his own work was sometimes clearly a kind of riposte to it. As early as 1948, Chaissac was able to write to Michel Ragon: 'I think we should go in the direction of *brut* and untrained art because painting in our era is encouraged too little for the artist to allow himself a sufficiently sustained education and development in order to achieve mastery.'[2] As was often the case with Chaissac, it's hard to tell how ironic this comment was meant to be, but it certainly shows that he was already aware, presumably through meeting Dubuffet, that *Art Brut* was an alternative to the laborious ladder of professional artistry.

While many of the original artists Dubuffet discovered were either dead or sealed off in institutions, some were still alive at the time he discovered them, and he greatly valued the opportunity to meet them. The early articles in the *Cahiers de l'Art Brut*, which were by many hands, and which began to

Gaston Chaissac, *Totem de Papiers Peints*, *c*. 1962, collage of wallpaper and ink, 164 x 62.5 cm. Chaissac created a number of 'totems' in the last few years of his life, which he hoped would create outrage: instead they were snapped up by collectors.

be published in 1964, focused very much on the *Art Brut* creator as a person and on the circumstances under which they worked, using their own words wherever possible. What Dubuffet didn't write about was the effect that being valued and promoted might have on these artists. There was often a striking discrepancy between the isolation of the *Art Brut* creator and the reputations and assessments to be found in what could be called the emerging Outsider art world. This would be most dramatic in those cases where the artist was locked away in an institution. As he wrote in 1951, about an early exhibition of such art:

> The five exhibitors care not in the slightest about this sort of thing [critical acclaim]. Besides, they don't even know this exhibition is taking place . . . All five are, in fact, at the time of writing shut away behind the padlocked doors of a lunatic asylum. And when you find yourself in a situation like that, you have more serious things to think about than seeing your name mentioned favourably by art critics in the press.[3]

In many ways, as we have seen, this sequestration provided an insulation from outside influence that suited Dubuffet's early protective attitude towards *Art Brut*.

He himself had a very respectful relationship with some of the institutionalized artists he met: with Aloïse Corbaz in particular, whom he visited in the asylum at La Rosière on several occasions, though we don't have much idea of how she felt about being presented as a high-level artist to an art world with which she had once been acquainted before her confinement. Dubuffet believed that her sequestration enabled Aloïse to elaborate her madness through her work:

> I fear that to begin with she had to suffer from dreadful disturbances, but it seems to me just as likely that her fabulating system, which was seen as the germ of her delirium, and which gave her such great pleasure, consoled her and gave her a reason for living . . . if we must

> talk of madness in Aloïse's case (I'm not sure of it), we are at all events witnessing a sort of cure not prompted by therapies blocking the delirium, but on the contrary through the free movement given to it and its fortunate flourishing.[4]

It follows that any outside attention that didn't respect this need would risk upsetting the delicate balance on which Aloïse's life work depended.

In other instances Dubuffet got to know *Art Brut* creators who were not psychiatric patients, such as Raphael Lonné or Magali Herrera, while they were still alive, and in many ways his encounters with them were just another part of their traffic with the world: in any case, his interest in them was as creative individuals and was emphatically not a commercial one. However, he must have realized that promoting a wider acceptance of their work would risk compromising their isolation. He wrote to them:

> What makes your drawings valuable is that they have been done in solitude and with no other concern than your own enchantment and if they subsequently came to be made in a manner less pure, I mean with the thought of showing them and of earning praise or advantage from them, they would risk losing part of what makes them so precious.[5]

Again, it looks as if it was the effect on the work, rather than on the artists themselves, that concerned him; but it could also be that he was keen to preserve the integrity of its creator's story and the degree to which this fitted the template for authentic *Art Brut*.

With Gaston Chaissac, the relationship was clearly that of two fellow-artists, with all the psychological complications that such a convergence of interests entailed. Dubuffet was clearly uncomfortable with Chaissac's artistic recognition (he ended up in the Venice Biennale) and felt that it compromised his status as a genuine Outsider. Ironically, Chaissac himself, as early as 1949 (long before Dubuffet consigned his work to the Collection Annexe in the early 1960s), declared that while he was taken for a creator of *Art Brut*, this

Richard Nie, *Untitled*, *c*. 1981, ink on paper, approx. 15 x 20 cm. This is a concentrated version of Nie's early doodles.

was not a view he shared.[6] I have come across several 'Outsider' artists (Richard Nie is one) who are similarly wary of being taken up by other people under any kind of label. But, as we saw in the case of the launch of the *Invention Neuve* category, once the concept of *Art Brut* became sufficiently well known, all sorts of artists could decide that they fitted its criteria and seek to be conscripted.

However much Dubuffet tried to insist on the absolute incompatibility of making authentic *Art Brut* and consciously being an 'artist' (advice he gave to both Lonné and Herrera) his main concern about the results of becoming aware of a public seems to have been the change in the quality of the work itself, rather than the effect on its creator. I want to focus here on the latter because, given the often vulnerable situation of Outsider artists, there are some obvious ethical issues to be faced. However sought-after it may be, the effect of commercial success or fame on any artist is a mixed blessing, to say the least, and the resulting imbalances and distortions can affect the artist's own psychology as well as the aesthetic quality of their work. Being recognized as a major artist in our culture seems to lead to the artist becoming half hero, half victim, and we have a highly ambivalent attitude towards the personal welfare of the artist, often seeming to be indifferent to, or even to collude with, their disturbance or suffering, for the sake of the resulting art.

Being discovered as an Outsider artist can come as something of a shock: after years of indifference or neglect someone suddenly enthuses about their work. Understandably, such creators may worry even more than other artists about why this interest is being shown, or what it really means. Some Outsiders who have been unearthed during their lifetime manage, like any other artist, to develop some kind of shell or persona with which to protect themselves. As Gary Fine's research has shown, a collector's appetite for local colour is

often as great as their interest in the work itself, and many of the 'self-taught' artists about whom he writes have quickly learned to feed their demands.[7] Others, however, are less able to cope with the interest of the outside world. I don't think there can be any question that in some instances Outsiders have been exploited by collectors and dealers, whose attitude can sometimes be frankly predatory. In many ways the kinds of institutions I shall be talking about – various kinds of special studios set up to cater for people with severe difficulties or special needs – serve to protect their members from such abuse.

In this respect our interest in Outsider Art is the mirror image of the professional attitude of art therapy: in the latter, the artistic value of the work comes second to the patient's welfare. Hence great care is taken to protect both the patient and their work from public exposure; or if the issue of exhibiting their work does come up, the effect on the patient artist is given careful consideration, and confidentiality may be preserved through anonymity. Some art therapists have protested at the indiscriminate ways in which patient art is subsumed as 'Outsider Art'.[8] The question of responsibility surfaces here: even if patients may give permission for their artwork to be shown, there is sometimes a question mark over this choice: are they in a position to assess the consequences, and what sort of pressures (to please, to perform) might they be under? The same pressures may also lead them to disguise or deny any negative effect it might have on them.

It is often difficult to be sure whether the purpose of such exhibitions is to show the work as testimony to the experience of mental illness, or to present it simply as 'art' in order to lessen the distance between patients and the rest of society. Some organizations (such as Artists In Mind, AIM) believe that artistic creativity is something inherently healing and that it is a natural response to psychic distress: hence exhibiting work seems like a natural extension of facilitating its creation. The more striking the social or psychological difference of such patient-artists, the greater the temptation there is to treat work that might otherwise be unremarkable as Outsider Art, as we shall see later, when we look at the work of special art studios dedicated to people with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and other forms of handicap.

When art is created in a therapeutic context there sometimes seems to be a conflict between its value as a form of self expression, or its use as a psychological document and its aesthetic or artistic value: while art therapists are taught to disregard the latter, other organizations aimed at 'mental health service users', such as AIM, who usually avoid the term 'therapy', stress the fact that it is the quality of the art that is their main focus. However, in both instances the therapist or assistant may find themselves drawn into a peculiarly intimate relation to the work, comparable to some aspects of the psychology of collecting. In the context of a therapeutic relationship this psychological investment is seen in terms of 'transference phenomena'; but there is an obvious conflict between seeing the work as an extension of the person who made it and looking at it from a wider aesthetic or art perspective. While there are certainly examples of Outsider artists being encouraged and supported by well-intentioned third parties,[9] there are well-known cases in what could be called the 'prehistory' of *Art Brut* where this encouragement has an unconscious spin to it, especially in a psychiatric setting. Lise Maurer refers to the 'transferential relation to an other in the work's fabrication, whether it is Aloïse and Jacqueline Porret-Forel, Wölfli and Morgenthaler, Laure Pigeon and her sister-in-law, or even Madge Gill and her sons, to name just a few.'[10] What Maurer is referring to is a subliminal or unconscious inclination of the patient-artist towards the person who has sometimes gone to enormous trouble to befriend them. Like many 'helping' relationships this includes, along with gratitude, the need to assert one's independence in however devious a way.

I have myself experienced these complex entanglements when working as an art therapist with Richard Nie, who has subsequently been recognized as an Outsider Artist.[11] It is worth going into some detail about this because it is very unusual to have this kind of opportunity to work so closely with someone like Richard, and also because it illustrates some of the difficult issues that arise. I first came across him in the context of a therapeutic community to which he had been admitted because of severe depression and an extremely poor self-image. Suddenly finding himself in this situation

Richard Nie, *Untitled*, *c*. 1984, ink and felt-tip on paper, approx. 61 x 46 cm. The 'field' surrounding the figures is almost as important as the figures themselves.

must have felt like being Robinson Crusoe parachuted into a Butlins holiday camp. Being expected to make art in an art therapy group, let alone say something about it, was extremely hard for him. To begin with he would invariably tear an A1 sheet of paper into something like a quarter of its size: some indication of the 'space' he felt able to occupy. At a review the consultant psychiatrist suddenly proposed that Richard should have individual sessions with me, and these provided us both with a more private place in which to meet. When I met him he usually destroyed much of his other work, which consisted of 'doodles' on telephone pads, very often drawn as a kind of anchor or touchstone while in the company of others late at night.

At home he stayed up all night drawing and making music on his guitar, and slept during the day, almost as if he was living a back-to-front version of normal routine. The existence of this secret work was something I only gradually became aware of. I continued working with him for six or seven years, eventually seeing him outside the context of NHS psychiatry. I felt that recognizing and encouraging his artistic creativity was an inextricable part of my therapeutic work with him, and while continuing to do psychological work with him, often treated him as a fellow-artist. Towards the end I suggested one or two galleries who might be interested in his work. After we had stopped working together he did in fact follow this up, and was quickly taken up by Monika Kinley, the co-founder of the Outsider Archive, as an Outsider.

I know well that 'transference issues'– including disagreeing over an article I wrote about him in the first number of *Raw Vision*[12] – were difficult for both of us to deal with, and for an art therapist to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds in this way was certainly unorthodox. But what I want to suggest here is that this crossing of conventional boundaries – between patient and therapist, therapy and art, solitude and communication – is in many ways also typical of the situation of Outsider Art today. From a strict *Art Brut* perspective, Richard should have been disqualified from being an Outsider: he certainly already knew something of the world of art when I met him (he had a small booklet about Klee); we made a memorable trip together

to visit a major Klee exhibition at the Tate in 1989; and after I finished my work with him, he attended a part-time art class at a London college. At the same time, he resented being labelled, whether as 'patient' or as 'Outsider'. Yet his work undoubtedly has most of the intrinsic hallmarks of Outsider Art. So when I criticize the ways in which various institutions seem to cultivate Outsider Art, I have to remember my own experience.

Art therapy is, of course, not simply about encouraging people to tap into their imagination or to be creative through art: it also invites people to recognize their pain and to reach some accommodation, in imagination at least, with the irrational side of their nature: this is also true of Outsider Art. We have already seen how, for Dubuffet, one of the reasons that *Art Brut* proved indigestible to many people was because its violence and wildness connected with areas of the psyche with which they did not want to get in touch. This is very different from the picture of therapy as a means of adjustment to normality, and relates more to the already mentioned idea that some art has the capacity to tap into various kinds of 'madness' that are not in themselves symptoms of mental illness. As Dubuffet himself wrote in connection with the work of Aloïse: 'Poetry, theatre, art are, everyone knows, essentially the fruit of delirium, windows through which to breathe its air for a moment.'[13] It is perhaps no coincidence that in his controversial book on the benefits of madness, Serge Triboulet puts it in a very similar way:

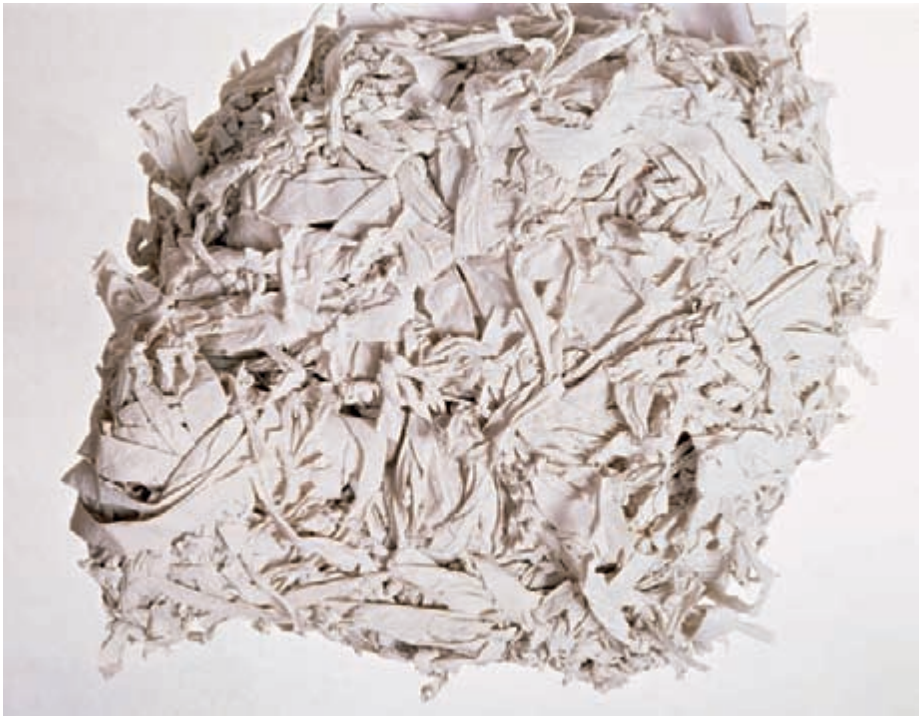
> The world of man is a construction comparable to a house whose language-based foundations and architecture are conceived along the lines of a gilded prison; a prison for his thought which cannot get over its walls; a prison without windows onto the external world but in which some cracks sometimes allow the hint of an exteriority . . . Delirium is a crack, a hitch in the laws of language, an opening onto the exterior world.[14]

Of course this madness can be found in many artworks (in the convulsive brushwork of Soutine or in Max Beckmann's underworld imagery, to give

just a couple of examples) but it can be found in a more purely distilled form in much Outsider Art, whether or not it was created by people officially diagnosed with disorders or disabilities.

Such a notion of creative madness potentially undermines the distinction between 'normal' and 'mentally ill' artists, or at least brings into question the neatness of any symptomatic fit between their art and their psychological disturbance, so that there is no longer a clear frontier between them and us, other than that provided by some kind of institution (hospital, home or unit). However, this frontier starts to appear much more obvious where there are more conspicuous anomalies or symptoms, such as are found in cases of severe handicap or disability. In many such instances, speech may be limited or lacking, and the capacity to relate to or communicate with others seems to be severely reduced. Here there is a parallel with the early psychiatric expectations of 'psychotic art': the less written or verbal supporting material there is, the greater the pressure on the artwork to provide the missing links. This pressure is intensified when special studios are set up for the severely handicapped, to offer space, materials and technical assistance for art-making, as well as the opportunity to sell or exhibit the resulting work. But precisely because the artists may not be in any position to offer any comment or explanation in relation to their work, and indeed we can sometimes only guess at their mental state, we can no longer be sure what level of intentionality is at work.

I want to focus on some extreme examples first because they bring to a head issues that are present to a lesser extent with other Outsiders and the relationship we have to them. In the end, these problems touch on the very basis of what we call 'art'. It is fascinating, as well as unsettling, to try to imagine the psychological state of someone like Judith Scott, who had, as far as we know, no language in which terms such as 'art' might appear, and only a rudimentary and enigmatic mode of contact with other people (this is very sensitively described in John MacGregor's study).[15] But however cruel it may seem, in human terms, to question what is going on when we call her artefacts 'art', and especially 'Outsider Art', we have to confront the underlying issues.



Judith Scott, *Untitled*, *c*. 1994, mixed media, approx. 110 x 110 cm. There is something deeply enigmatic about much of Scott's work: this piece is like one of John Cage's celebrations of silence.

We have to try and be clear about the difference between providing help, support and encouragement, part of which may include the display and sale of work, and the implications of calling this 'Outsider Art'.

The first difficulty is obvious: no matter how tactfully support and encouragement are provided, such studios are artificial communities in which artworks are made that would not otherwise have seen the light of day, as we saw in the case of Gugging. Even if it might be said that some members live in what amounts to their own separate worlds, or seem indifferent to the fate of their artwork (as seems to have been the case with Judith Scott or Dwight Mackintosh), this is still a rather different picture from that of the utterly isolated Outsider. The provision of special art studios undoubtedly provides real sources of fulfilment and self-expression for those who attend them, and I don't want to question the therapeutic value of this; but problems arise when some of their work is selected as being of particular artistic interest or value. In addition the role of the assistant or mentor is also problematic: even if they are not articulated, some of the transferential issues I have mentioned are bound to make themselves felt on both sides, and there is also the question of the degree of subliminal influence they may exercise.

It's only fair to point out that Frits Gronert of Herenplaats (a Dutch studio for the handicapped) recognizes that 'if we want to take the work seriously we first have to be critical about it ourselves. The quality of the work should be the most important and not the handicap. Also filing this art as "Outsider Art" is a choice, which acknowledges the art and not the handicap.'[16] The implication is that not all work produced in this context is automatically Outsider, and that a qualitative judgement has to be made before it can be given that title. However, this is not quite as simple an operation as it seems. There is probably a compensatory process at work when we look at the work of severely disabled artists, especially when we have also met them: we make an extra effort, give the benefit of the doubt to work that in other contexts we might find awkward, repetitive or crude. Calling it 'Outsider' can seem like a way of redressing the imbalance between them and us.

The second difficulty involves something more than the usual distance between the supposed Outsider and us who confer that title on them. As mentioned in the Introduction, Dubuffet himself made provocative use of the term 'imbecilic stupor' to indicate the extent to which *Art Brut* was to be located in the primeval and the inarticulate. As in the case of Child Art – and indeed the art of certain chimpanzees in captivity – there is a significant discrepancy here between the presumed motives for which such work is produced and our reception of it, and this might make us question quite where this creativity is located: in those who make the work, or in us who choose to see it as 'art'. The same question arises when we come to deal with the special studios set up for people with serious learning difficulties: there are all sorts of questions about what might be prompting them to make it. Certainly there are drawings, paintings and objects produced in these studios that have the rawness and strangeness characteristic of Outsider Art, and certainly the people who create them are, in rather an obvious way, on the margins of normal society; but does that in itself make them Outsiders?

Part of the difficulty we are confronting here has to do with some of the unspoken assumptions, not so much about what is or is not 'good art', but about what the conditions are under which we are prepared to attribute the kind of individual creative responsibility, however diffuse or inarticulate, that is essential to anything that we call 'art'. Alain Bouillet writes that:

> the work of art is only such – that is, both 'work' and 'of art' – and only has meaning for us because 'it is only present through a relation with the other', because it 'calls for the other', because it 'requires the other'. But the *art brut* work has no need of the other . . . The maker of *art brut* neither invites nor addresses us. The encounter with the other is conjured away and all we are left with is the projection of our own fantasies.[17]

These remarks don't, surely, refer to anything as obvious as an explicit intention; but rather to a more obscure way in which works of art are implicitly

addressed to some kind of audience, whether past, present or future. If this absence of need for the other is true of *Art Brut* in general, it is surely even more so when the artist is effectively *unable* to communicate with us because of the severity of his or her mental handicap. For here the discrepancy between what an artist might or might not have intended and what the work itself 'says' to someone else, which is an essential contribution to the meaning of any work of art, comes to a head.

These problems crop up in other contexts where we cannot be sure that anything resembling intention in its normal sense is at work. Our interest in certain kinds of animal mark-making, such as chimpanzees, cats (see the lovely spoof *Why Cats Paint*)[18] and now even dolphins, point to a border-zone where mark-making is given significance, but from the outside, by us (again the similarity with Outsider Art is inescapable). There has been much debate about what kind of 'intelligence' might be at work here; or whether this is some kind of game that animals, rather like children, learn to play with us; and if there might be a common biological root to human and animal creativity. Here again we encounter that grey area in between intentionality and automatism (see chapter Five). But if various forms of disobedience or defiance are characteristic of Outsider Art, in however vestigial a form, then some kind of intention must be surely involved in order for a work to be described as such.

To what extent is the bare creation of an object expressive of individuality? It might look 'original' to us, but that does not mean that it actually is on that account alone a personal expression. The idea that when a work looks sufficiently out of the ordinary its strangeness must be some form of individual expression is in fact rather a questionable one. In the case of work by some autistic artists, for example, some writers have suggested that what we are looking at is the direct transmission of perceptions that have not been filtered by linguistic constructs because of this; the work may look original to us, but it is not really the result of a genuine artistic creativity.

Clearly this is relevant to how we look at some of the work produced by people with severe handicap and little or no language: there may be various forms of reciprocity at work (suggested, for example, by the pleasure

shown in the work being admired), but to what extent do these amount to the kind of 'relation with the other' that Bouillet refers to? Then I have to ask: if we think we see creativity and originality in such work, how much does this presumed relation really matter? We readily discount the intentionality behind much Spiritualist and psychotic art because it's incompatible with our beliefs (or non-beliefs): instead, we recognize its creativity in purely individual terms. Isn't treating the work of people with SLD the same way just another step or two further down the same road? Couldn't we end up in effect treating what they make as a found object, regardless of whether it is intentionally creative? This is surely the point at which an ethical dimension enters the picture: at what point does serious handicap or disturbance alter what could be called the balance of intentionality?

This could be true even for some of the classic examples of 'psychotic art' (Aloïse, Voll, Ramírez). Some writers, such as Dr Jacqueline Porret-Forel, who was Aloïse's psychiatrist, have taken a strong stand against any premature attribution of artistic intention to 'psychotic art': 'So long as we lack the criteria for detaching "artistic intention" from pathological art, all these comparisons [between psychotic artists and other artists] will be misleading. They always amount to a surreptitious identification of the autistic sphere in which the patient lives with the sphere of art.'[19] The implication here is that psychotic art is not made with the same intentionality as other art, and that in calling it 'art' we are appropriating it for our own purposes, in effect kidnapping it and holding it hostage as 'Outsider Art'. Is the same true for work created by people with serious types of handicap? Perhaps there might be some other kind of intentionality at work, one that operates at a pre-verbal and pre-symbolic level?

Even where we seem to be beyond any ordinary form of intentionality, let alone that usually associated with the creation of 'works of art', there is arguably something inherent in the human gesture of making something that still has its own significance. As one writer, Madeleine Lommel, puts it: 'How can we not take account of the fundamental impulses, that is, the confrontation with matter, that innate process on which man has to depend

Josef Hofer, *Untitled*, 2004, pencil and felt-tip on paper, 44 x 60 cm. This recent Hofer combines powerful visual impact with narcissistic subject-matter; but then so did Egon Schiele.

in order to impose an answerable presence.'[20] At the same time, she admits that 'it seems hard to dissociate a stance of survival, of the necessity of finding some footing in the world, from that of the artist naturally anchored in social life'.[21] What constitutes an 'answerable presence', and what kind of footing in the world do artists with SLD have through the special studios they attend? Perhaps we should simply give them the benefit of the doubt? Obviously what is at stake here is how we are to draw the boundary between acts that are assertive of some fundamental, existential and individual 'expression', and the more sophisticated and self-conscious forms of creativity we are used to recognizing as 'art'.

The real issue here is what constitutes artistic creativity: how far can an artwork be the unmediated effect of forces that are almost totally 'unconscious' or 'automatic' and still continue to be seen as an original and individual creative expression? We have already touched on this question in relation to the appeal of automatism to various Modernist artists; but here we are confronted by phenomena in which the decision to abandon conscious control plays little or no part. Even in the case of a professional artist like Willem de Kooning, who continued to paint when suffering from advanced Alzheimer's, we can assume that something of their previous experience was carried over on some level. But can this be extended to the case of someone like Judith Scott who has never acquired language and therefore has no notion of 'art', someone whose sense of self is something we can only guess at, but who nevertheless produces extraordinary things? Certainly they have created something remarkable, but to what extent can we say they are responsible for it, even in the obscure sense used by Lommel?

One answer would be to say that severe handicap, precisely because it has never progressed beyond the pre-verbal, displays a fundamental form of artistic creativity that is normally overlaid by language and acculturation. This is related to the idea that some psychotic art involves a regression to similar pre-linguistic forms of creativity, only here there is nothing to be swept away. In his usual provocative way, Michel Thévoz says of the 'regressive' nature of Josef Hofer's work:

Paul Duhem, untitled, no date, mixed media on paper, 40 x 30 cm.

> This is precisely the interest of such a production: expression at its potential stage, the riches of beginnings, the imaginal field left fallow, sex in its wild state, before the operation of any selections or realisations, to be sure, but also the eliminations and mutilations that shape an individuality in conformity with cultural norms.[22]

I suspect that this may be a kind of romanticism like that which informs our attitude towards child art. In both cases one difficulty is in reconciling what are in theory anonymous and generalized creative impulses with the kind of original and individual expression that plays such a crucial role in the myths of creativity that fuel our interest in Outsider Art. The same writer has argued that this focus on what he calls the individual signature is precisely what *Art Brut* challenges; but he also recognizes that if we jettison this, we are pulling the cultural carpet from under our own feet.[23] This is an issue I shall return to in the Conclusion.

Perhaps the anonymity and the repetitiveness of some of this work is precisely what attracts us, as if it were some sort of antidote to the emphasis on personal expression so prevalent in the art world – though serial permutation is of course also a part of that art world – or perhaps the room for variations is so narrowed down (in Paul Duhem or Heinrich Reisenbauer, for example) that they become all the more striking and, as it were, micro-expressive. Is there a real difference between work made by someone struggling with a handicap (Parkinson's or paralysis of the executive hand might be examples) and someone who seems to be largely governed by it or almost submerged in it? We have seen the role that the background story played in establishing an authentic provenance for *Art Brut*, but here something slightly different is happening: knowing that a painting or drawing has been made by someone who is severely handicapped, in a specially designated studio, effectively re-frames it, so that, far from disregarding the handicap in favour of the art, we engage in something like positive discrimination.

This brings up the question of how our interest in patient-art in general affects us, the spectators and consumers of such work. Are we simply

Henry Darger, *Untitled (massacre of children)*, undated, watercolour, pencil, attached collage fragments, 53.5 x 155 cm. For all Darger's passionate championing of children against adult authority, there is a sense here that part of him colludes with the torturers.

interested in its artistic or creative aspects, as collectors like Phyllis Kind insist, or does the artist's life story play an even more important role than it does in mainstream art, where we are all familiar with what might be called the 'Van Gogh syndrome'? As I've already said, the life story of any Outsider is not just a matter of authenticating the work's provenance: it is also a link to the mental state or social isolation that presided over its creation. In relation to the exhibition of work from the Prinzhorn Collection, Constance Perrin has argued that the unsettling effect of these works, combined with their psychopathological context, effectively eclipses the usual aesthetic response we make to works of art.[24] I am not sure that such a clear dividing line exists, between work so stamped by disturbance or suffering that we may disregard its 'aesthetic' qualities, and other kinds of intensely expressive art that we know something of the human background to.

If we are drawn to the extraordinary and extreme psychological experiences that seem to be conveyed by artwork created by patients or people with designated handicaps, this extends to much Outsider Art. Despite the poignancy of his life history, the juxtaposition in Henry Darger's

work of clichéd images of innocent childhood with sadistic scenes of the same children being mutilated and massacred is uncomfortable to witness. Sometimes the appeal is of something barely imaginable, at the very edge of empathy, and this could be called psychological Outsiderness; but at other times it's something we can recognize in ourselves, even if we may prefer not to admit it. I don't think these psychological effects can ever be straightforward: sometimes they involve sympathetic identification and compassion, at other times they involve morbid fascination, secret superiority or even a vicarious perversity, to mention just a few reactions. We may have no way of telling how far this imaginative inhabitation of patient artwork corresponds to what the artist originally felt; but this makes little difference to how it affects our internal world. Again, this is something we experience in relation to other art, but it takes on more exceptional forms in relation to Outsider Art.

These problems are further complicated, as we have already seen, by the possibility that the features of disturbance or suffering we seem to be faced with may not belong entirely to the artist's personal 'inner world'. Just as in any other kind of art, we must allow for irony, dramatic exaggeration and other 'rhetorical' features, and there are of course also various forms of collective or archetypal symbolism to be taken into account. There may even be an inherently histrionic dimension to the imagery of psychic suffering. The archetypal psychologist James Hillman calls this 'pathologizing': 'the soul's autonomous ability to create illness, morbidity, disorder, abnormality and suffering in any aspect of its behaviour and to experience and imagine life through this deformed and afflicted perspective.'[25] If we follow him in this, then some of the exaggerations and peculiarities of Outsider Art might be due to a sort of pathologizing rhetoric, rather than to actual disturbance. This issue becomes central when we're faced with the work of someone like Henry Darger. John MacGregor, who has a psychotherapeutic training, sees the mixture of the sentimental and the macabre in his imagery as signs of a serious disorder that could have – and, he suggests, might have – resulted in serious criminal behaviour.[26] Yet Darger's work is also tapping into the

Johann Hauser, *Naked Woman with Hat*, 1986, coloured pencil on paper, 72 x 102 cm. Hauser's images of women are often like manic x-ray pictures of their hidden sexuality.

collective pathology of the American psyche, with its sugary clichés about childhood innocence and its corresponding Plutonian depths of depravity and abuse.

Does Outsider Art pitch us further or deeper than other art into these psychic depths, which are sometimes dark as well as obscure? It's hard not to admit that some work does tap into psychological territory that is in various ways edgy or outside the norm. But the fact that it is created by people supposedly on the edge of society or beyond the reach of fashion or convention doesn't mean that there isn't also a lot of Outsider Art that has a quirky or humorous feel to it: sometimes the two overlap, as in Scottie Wilson's drawings, and even Wölfli makes visual jokes. Like other types of art, Outsider Art often deals with 'feelings' that don't readily fit into our emotional categories; but because of the psychological as well as social marginalization of its creators its range of feeling may be more extreme. Nevertheless, although its provenance may be eccentric or strange, as the boundaries become increasingly blurred between its creators and other neglected or unrecognized artists, we now have to ask what difference it now makes to carry on applying the term.

Conclusion

> Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial vessels dry; this is repeated again and again; finally one can predict it in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony.
>
> Kafka

In some ways the fact that the field of Outsider Art is so thick with questions makes it similar to other movements in the history of modern art, such as Dadaism or Futurism. Just like such Modernist movements, which saw themselves as taking art in new and controversial directions, Dubuffet's *Art Brut* sought to embody a new kind of artistic creativity that claimed to be radically different from the conventional one. But it was unlike these movements in that its membership was defined from the outside and nobody could consciously choose to belong to it. For the same reason, the new criteria it proposed were exemplified by works that had already been created: in fact a key part of its challenge to convention was that such works had been created from within areas of cultural immunity, by artists who were ignorant of or oblivious to the art world and its preoccupations. This last part of its image of creativity, if close to the truth in some cases, was often a simplification, if not an exaggeration: although many *Art Brut* creators did work in isolation, this in itself did not mean that they didn't have their own perverse or eccentric takes on the outside world, often including some image, however remote, of the world of 'art'.

Even after these creators had been discovered, it was essential for the integrity of *Art Brut* that they should have no contact with the contemporary art world. Given this self-denying ordinance, even Dubuffet could see that problems were bound to arise once the concept entered cultural circulation.

Perhaps there was a brief period when *Art Brut* was able to exist within mainstream culture without losing its peculiarity, but a process of gradual assimilation was bound to ensue. This began with the first publications and exhibitions and was accelerated as soon as *Art Brut* artists began to encounter a wider audience for their work: when he cautioned Raphael Lonné and Magali Herrera against seeing themselves as 'artists', it was precisely in an attempt to forestall this. But he had to admit that, short of putting *Art Brut* in permanent quarantine, this attempt to protect its artists from the effects of going public was, unless they were already insulated by something as drastic as psychiatric confinement, doomed to failure. If his attitude was protective, both of *Art Brut* creators themselves and of the vulnerability of their creativity, maybe this also had something to do with the collector's reluctance to broadcast such outstanding examples of raw creativity.

Along with other writers,[1] I have argued that *Art Brut* was from the beginning a reaction-formation: in other words, that its controversial vision of a new mode of creativity supposedly outside culture – or rather, its rediscovery of a fundamental form of creativity that culture had eclipsed – was actually an offshoot of that culture, and a reflection, however distorted, of it. Perhaps *Art Brut* and Outsider Art are in some ways like Naïve Art or Primitive Art, categories which were also introduced to distinguish certain forms of art from mainstream culture, and which were defined over the heads of the 'artists' concerned. In both these instances, once the term was coined various artists began to identify themselves accordingly and their original innocence was contaminated. The career of the Douanier Rousseau is a good example of the kinds of compromise, often unconscious, sometimes tragic-comic, that ensue once an artist is christened 'naif' during their lifetime.

In the case of 'Primitive Art', the notion of 'art' was often projected onto cultures in which the making of objects had served rather different purposes, and where the European concept of 'artist' didn't apply. In addition, as with Outsider Art, once these cultures became aware of the term 'primitive' their original distance from European culture was lessened: not only was there sometimes more European influence than admitted, but a traffic rapidly

developed in faked or doctored versions that looked suitably 'primitive' but lacked most of the artistic quality of their models. More problematic, besides the 'airport art' that is so scorned by cognoscenti, there are also contemporary tribal artists who find themselves torn between fidelity to traditions that are effectively on the verge of extinction and the assimilation of modern Western influences.[2]

There are some interesting parallels between what is now happening to Outsider Art and what has happened to Australian Aboriginal art. Originally such work was not even thought of as art, but consisted of paintings, body decorations and other artefacts made for strictly ritual purposes, and often destroyed or left to decay afterwards. Only with the advent of Europeans did it begin to be taken out of its sacred context and acquire different values: principally ethnographic or artistic ones. Partly as a result of the impact of Western civilization, Aboriginal art and the ceremonies associated with it went into decline. As a reaction to this, in the late 1970s, following Geoffrey Bardon's lead, community painting centres were established, in which modern materials such as acrylic paint and hardboard were used with the aim of preserving and transmitting traditional 'dreaming' motifs that had previously been created on the ground using natural pigments.

Because a wider audience for such works soon developed that was non-Aboriginal and uninitiated, some of these motifs were modified so that their sacred power was not misdirected. At the same time these paintings were in effect translated from their original tribal and ritual context into the very different one of being regarded as artworks for a sophisticated audience. It could be argued that only in this way could the visual richness of Aboriginal art be recognized as an important part of Australian culture. However, what also began to emerge was a hybrid idiom in which motifs from tribal art mingled with what look like elements of Modernism, whether the latter were consciously encouraged or not. Commercial interest in the work of individual artists like Clifford Possum grew rapidly, and this in turn led to 'carpetbagging' in which some of these artists were induced to make

their own, often somewhat dubious, deals with galleries. In some cases, Yuendemu for example, an entire centre has been taken over and re-orientated towards the commercial market. The problem is compounded by the shift from traditional to modern forms of nomadism, and by the break-up of Aboriginal communities. In addition, cheap versions of 'aboriginal' art are sometimes mass-produced (even by backpackers).[3] Here again, there are parallels with the commercial exploitation of Outsider artists and with the situation of some artists with special needs in dedicated studios.

The ambiguous position in relation to mainstream culture of this 'neo-Aboriginal' art, some of which is made by white artists who have adopted aboriginal culture, is in some ways the converse of the problems affecting many of today's Outsider artists. While Aboriginal artists are torn between loyalty to their group and the seductions of being an independent artist along Western lines, Outsiders begin as marginalized or eccentric figures, who then have to cope with incorporation into the wider society and its culture. Many of the arguments about exactly what defines 'authentic' Aboriginal art are strikingly similar to those bedevilling the Outsider Art scene. In both cases there is a comparable 'grey area' in between discovery, promotion and exploitation; both fields are haunted by powerful fantasies about an authentic or 'original' form of creativity; and both have to face the fact that this may no longer exist in its pure form, once it has been infected by mainstream culture. I have argued that these parallels are accentuated in the case of special studios set up for psychiatric patients or disabled artists. There is perhaps a comparison to be made here with Gugging's ambition to transform itself from a studio for patient-artists attached to a psychiatric hospital into an Art/Brut Centre, in which the artwork produced will automatically have that label attached to it.

Today the problem is not so much that the original creative innocence of *Art Brut* creators may become corrupted through subsequent public exposure, as that a whole new generation of Outsider artists is emerging, who are more likely to be aware of the fact that this is a category they might qualify to be admitted to (again there are parallels with neo-Aboriginal art).

Outsider Art is no longer simply the revelation of a hidden, secret creativity, in the way that *Art Brut* once was, but has become something like a shadow version or inverted image of the manic promotions of the contemporary art world. This is most obvious in those art studios, ranging from the residential, such as Gugging, to the non-residential, such as Herenplaats, where the artists as well as their art are in a sense on show while they are working. It is hard to say what effects this attention has on them: appreciating the outside world's interest in their work is one thing; being able to make sense of what being called an Outsider might mean is quite another.

While we should be aware of how this might affect not only these artists as individuals but also their artwork, there is also another dimension, which applies to us as spectators: this has to do with the underlying images of artistic creativity that are part of our interest in art of any kind, but which Outsider Art seems to offer in a particularly vivid and intensified form. Not only do such institutional studios offer us the chance to eavesdrop on the Outsider artist at work, but they also present a tangible image of artistic creativity under adverse circumstances, in that the obstacles posed by handicap or disability are evident and seem to have a more intimate relation to the work created than is the case with other artists. This is not a deliberate voyeuristic spectacle, like the exhibition of lunatics in Bedlam; it is something like an unconscious side-effect of the therapeutic endeavour in many such institutions, but it feeds into the attraction Outsider Art in general has for us.

What about Outsiders who are not attached to any institution? The obvious problem here is that Outsiders, like *Art Brut* artists before them, are sufficiently obstinate or perverse to continue making their work without the promise, however remote, of it being one day discovered and appreciated: hence they are, almost by definition, invisible. Such artists often find their way to a dealer or gallery almost by accident, or through word of mouth, and once they have been taken on will eventually find their work being exhibited. Some, like Albert Louden, seem to have developed a protective shell or persona, much as any artist does, to help them deal with the outside world. Others,

such as Richard Nie, have mixed feelings about public interest in their work, and acquiring the label of Outsider is something they don't feel very comfortable with. Some dealers have a genuinely protective attitude towards their Outsider clients, but it must be difficult for a dealer to disentangle the need to cushion their artist from the shock of exposure from the need for exclusivity in handling their work.

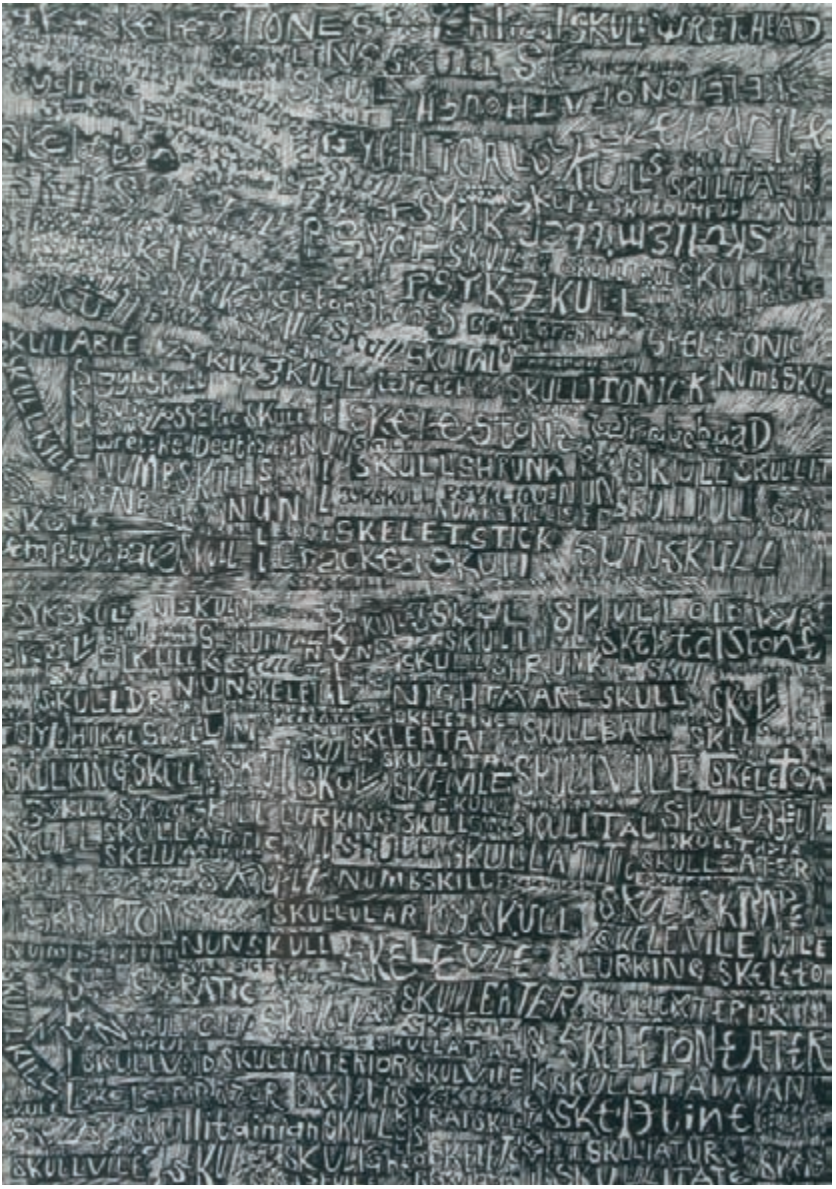
This may raise a number of questions about Outsider artists' relation to the commercial art world, but does it necessarily dilute the originality of their work? There is no simple answer to this: some artists may be able to insulate their creativity from the effects of commercial interest, while others may either start or end up being swayed by it. What could be called the 'Chaissac effect', where such artists already know something of the art world, and find their own eccentric ways of coming to terms with it, will become more common. There are various, suitably eccentric, ways in which Outsiders might do this. There is a famous story that, while a Bond Street gallery was exhibiting his work at suitably high prices, Scottie Wilson set himself up on the pavement outside, offering it to passers-by for a fiver or two. There is also the example of Banksy, the famous and maverick graffiti artist who nevertheless has his own dealer to take legal action a gainst the marketing of fake versions of his prints: perhaps this is another way of managing to have your cake and eat it that might be followed by some Outsiders.

Then there is the question of the link, which I have argued is unavoidable, between the social or psychological alienation of the Outsider's lifestyle and the work itself. If their eccentric or marginal situation is somehow bound up with the originality and authenticity of their work, how do we determine the degree of its 'outsiderness'? Beauvais Lyons's cleverly spoofed Spelvin Outsider Art collection presents the story of a fictitious collector couple and the acquisition of the artworks in their collection, and the biographies of each artist, as well as their actual artwork, all of which has been created by Lyons.[4] It is sufficiently impressive to have been taken for the real thing when first shown. One of the things it makes uncomfortably clear

is the crucial role played by the life stories in giving the work 'authenticity', and it also gives us a hint as to what sort of recipes would fit the biographical bill. One of the effects of the Spelvin collection is to make us aware of the kinds of typical templates for Outsider artists that are a result of its acquiring a history and a tradition of its own.

These typical profiles are infused with elements of the post-Renaissance image of the artist as an exceptional creative personality, something that is crystallized in the image of the Outsider artist. The fact that actual circumstances often match these templates doesn't diminish their power as a governing fantasy or myth. It is as if Outsider narratives of creative awakening are more extreme versions of what we expect to find in the wider world of art: they include a familiar range of events that could be said to constitute a break in someone's life, such as psychological trauma, mental breakdown or physiological injury, but these can also have been present so early that they function as a starting point rather than a turning point. Such material causes are brought into play within an empirical perspective that looks for externally verifiable factors, and it is common to many scientific studies of creativity and its origins. Nevertheless there is something unpredictable about artistic giftedness that resists being fitted into such boxes, and Outsider Art seems to display this in its most intransigent forms. This may be one reason why it's so hard to anticipate what will happen to the reservoir of wild artistic talents that feeds it.

Once again we come to the question of the extent to which being an Outsider is something natural, an a priori given, or whether it is to some extent a reaction that results in someone withdrawing from most of the usual forms of commerce with others. Sometimes this distance does seem to have been there from the beginning – most obviously in severe handicap – but in other cases it seems to have been a choice made, often quite late in life, sometimes precipitated by retirement. In all probability there is now an even wider range of peculiar life circumstances associated with Outsider Art than there was with Dubuffet's *Art Brut*, and many of them are not that different from those associated with other kinds of artist. Out of the vast pool of



Nick Blinko, *Numbskull*, 1996, ink on paper, 20 x 15 cm. These text-drawings demand a painful effort from the viewer to read them – perhaps an echo of the artist's own feelings.

artists working in obscurity, many of whom could be called eccentric through that fact alone, why do we pick some out as Outsiders?

If the artist's life story can no longer be relied on as an index of authenticity, we are left with the intrinsic strangeness of the work itself. I can hardly imagine the state of mind in which Nick Blinko's densely packed, almost illegible microtexts were produced, but in their form and in their content they certainly conjure up an agoraphobic intensity. This fits the image we have of Outsider Art as something secretive, obsessional and on the edge of comprehensibility; but this 'privacy', which seems to teeter on the edge of any verifiable form of 'communication', also has its analogues in the work of other artists. As Lyle Rexer writes, 'These artists presage a new time of orphaned, unplaceable art, a time when the frightening, hermetic privacy of outsider art and the deviations of autodidacts take their place among the fragmentary and self-sanctioning productions of artists everywhere.'[5] Again, it seems arbitrary to select just some of these artists as Outsiders.

If a wide variety of work that has these qualities of secrecy and obsession continues to be created, what reasons are there to call any of it 'Outsider'? This has as much to do with our need for evidence of a radical form of creativity that is profoundly antisocial as it does with the inherent character of the work itself. Even as early as 1979 Roger Cardinal, one of the curators of the Hayward Gallery 'Outsiders' show, suggested that: 'In the end, there is really no such thing as Outsider Art, no more than there is such a thing as the General Public. There is only the ferment of individuality, that is: the contrary of anonymity and generalisation.'[6] Some writers would take this even further: 'I do not believe that the art of outsiders is necessarily *purer*, closer to the sources of creativity, *better*, or more authentic than that done by insiders.'[7] This is, in its way, as controversial a position as Dubuffet's original assertion that *Art Brut* had nothing to do with official culture. Some of this similarity between Outsiders and other artists is due to the fact that mainstream artists have been influenced by Outsider Art, but some has more to do with the circumstantial envelope surrounding the work, where art produced in a particularly isolated context is called Outsider, while very similar art

Willem van Genk, *Urbanism and Architecture*, 1960–70, mixed media on paper, 94.5 x 170 cm. The contradictory logos and slogans in Van Genk's work may be partly tongue-in-cheek.

produced in a more familiar context is not. As Rexer goes on to suggest, there would then be little point in continuing to use the term 'Outsider' on that basis alone.

If the boundaries between artists who might be called 'Outsider' and other artists have become increasingly blurred, this is not just a matter of the situation of individual artists: it is also the result of shifts in the culture they inhabit. At the time Dubuffet set up the parameters for *Art Brut* it was easier to see the difference between it and the mainstream art world; but more than fifty years have elapsed since then, and many of the characteristics that were once peculiar to Outsider Art can now be found in the work of artists who would never qualify for that title. Imitation or pastiche, as the examples of Chaissac or Van Genk show, is perhaps a more frequent ingredient in *Art Brut* than its discoverers like to admit, but the compliment has been returned by post-Modern artists such as Julian Schnabel or George Baselitz. At the same time Outsider Art now figures on the curriculum of many art schools along with Modernist and post-Modernist art as another potential source of inspiration. As a result of this and other forms of cultural

exposure, Outsider Art, although it is still met with critical hostility, has certainly infiltrated the world of Fine Art, even if it is mainly from the side of practising artists.

In 1992 the exhibition Parallel Visions[8] did for Outsider Art what the Primitivism and 20th Century Art show of 1984 had done for 'primitivism': not only did it trace the connections between Outsider Art and individual modern artists, but it also re-examined some of the underlying cultural assumptions about creativity and intentionality.[9] The more recent Inner Worlds Outside[10] show of 2006 also flagged up some of these issues. First of all, it tried to argue that Outsider Art was not as separate from the wider world of 'insider' art as its partisans would like it to be: not just because so many modern artists have been influenced by it (Ensor, Masson, Burra, Guston and Nutt were among those included in the show), but also because many of the original Outsiders were inevitably in some kind of contact with the outside world. At the same time the exhibition centred on a comprehensive selection of 'classic' Outsider Art, which reinforced its authoritative status and seemed like a tribute to an established tradition, perhaps even a kind of memorial to a cultural breakthrough that has already begun to take its place in history. This left unclear the situation in relation to this of some of the artists included in the show who could be called 'post-Outsiders', such as Chris Hipkiss or Michel Nedjar.

Even within the field the original criteria for Outsider Art have multiplied and diversified, and a host of new forms – visionary art, contemporary folk art, self-taught art, 'singular art' and 'differentiated art' (a French term for art produced in special studios for the handicapped), for example – have emerged. These amount either to sub-sets within what was previously called Outsider, or to alternatives that suggest some dissatisfaction with the original term. Allied to this is a growing doubt and unease about exactly what constitutes Outsider Art today and who decides this. *Raw Vision*, which was the first magazine in the UK to document and promote Outsider Art, now adopts an increasingly wide-ranging and ecumenical perspective: it illustrates a wealth of bizarre and idiosyncratic artwork, and this is a sign that it cannot

Chris Hipkiss, *Stars and Olives*, 1993, pencil on paper, 71.5 x 57.5 cm. The androgynous ecology in this image is highlighted by the sheen of the intensely worked graphite.

go on indefinitely sticking to the groove of 'classic' Outsider Art. In fact, to have produced more than sixty issues documenting this with an impressive quality of illustration is a remarkable achievement. At the same time, like many other art magazines, it is dependent on gallery advertising for its main revenue and is therefore under some pressure to act as something of a shop window for whatever is on the market.

All of this reflects the intense commercial, and indeed curatorial, traffic in anything that could be called Outsider Art. Since this is a label largely conferred by collectors and dealers, there is a real danger that it will turn into a self-confirming attribution. Something like this is already happening: the cachet conferred by the term 'Outsider' translates readily into high prices and aggressive marketing, and it is not always applied responsibly. In many ways the speculation in Outsider Art is no different from that involved in the promotion of other fashionable art. I think there may also be some kind of compensatory dynamic at work, whereby the commercial success of art produced by social outcasts or psychological misfits is felt to be some form of positive discrimination, on a symbolic if not an actual level. As prospecting for works that have something of the flavour of *Art Brut* becomes more desperate, so one can see a stretching of standards, a slackening of rigour: this may be a sign that the supply of sufficiently high-quality work is drying up.

There may be a number of reasons for this. One has to do with institutional sources, with the changes in psychiatric hospitalization and in the treatment of the handicapped that I have already mentioned. In many cases it's as if the old negative institutions have been replaced by more positive ones, and in providing facilities for creative activities these encourage a hybrid kind of art that has its own profile of difference without on that account amounting to Outsider Art. Then there are more widespread cultural shifts that might be thought to erode isolation, most evident in the pervasive presence of media such as television, the internet, personal sound systems and the like. It is easy to see this as a kind of cultural homogenization, but the effect may not be so predictable: when I see a member of Herenplaats drawing away while plugged into their iPod, I can imagine the private envelope of sound as yet another

layer of insulation from the world around them, or as a familiar and comforting routine. The mediatization of our world is connected by some writers to the shift from a predominantly rural society to an urban and industrial – or even post-industrial – one: 'Outsider Art is not an art outside culture: it is the acculturated mode of transformation and renascence of inventive Folk culture and Folk creativity in the new post-agricultural civilisation.'[11] Behind the scenes here I suspect we find the familiar image of the Outsider as an eccentric, hermit-like character living in some remote, untouched and probably rural setting. Yet one doesn't have to be geographically isolated in order to be an Outsider: it is perfectly possible to be Robinson Crusoe in a bedsit.

If there can be no denying that Outsider Art is a part of culture, then the question arises, whether it is somehow immune to the historical factors that have affected the situation of every modern art movement within that culture. Even if we took the term to refer essentially to a cluster of ideas and fantasies about radical creativity, rather than to a specific category of artworks, this cluster of ideas must be subject to its own form of historical evolution. Dubuffet's concept of *Art Brut* can be seen as the climax of the post-Renaissance tradition of viewing the artist as a uniquely gifted individual, even though he promoted it as the tip of an iceberg of 'normal' creativity that was potentially available to anyone. Several more recent writers, most notably Ellen Dissenayake, have argued for a longer-term view of such a 'natural' artistic creativity, with a significant social function, of which the modern elitist art world is only a distorted version.[12] It's hard to see quite where Outsider Art would fit into this picture: on the one hand it could be seen as demonstrating the survival of this universal creativity; on the other hand, its emphasis on social and psychological eccentricity belongs to the more modern concept of creativity as something exceptional and marginal.

This contradictory combination in the mythology of Outsider creativity, between images of an extreme individualism and more popular or universal ones, points to some kind of fault-line within it. The very idea of 'true creation' in its exceptional, individualized form, which has been the most durable touchstone of Outsider Art, might turn out to belong to an historical era;

one that, even if we take it for granted now, may not last forever. Just as there was a different tradition of artistry before the Renaissance, more artisan and anonymous, so it's possible to imagine in the future another image of the artist supplanting the one we have come to accept as natural. The extraordinary work subsumed under the label of Outsider Art might then be seen from a rather different perspective: as something like the final spasm of this extravagantly subjective and individualistic tradition.

In the light of all of these difficulties surrounding the future of *Art Brut* and Outsider Art, one response would be to set up a strictly historical frame for *Art Brut* itself (for example the first half of the twentieth century). This would entail treating it as a cultural rather than a natural phenomenon, one rooted in an identifiable period of Modernism, with its own specific and local characteristics. More recent work, no matter how vivid or extraordinary, would then be misrepresented if it were to be called *Art Brut* because its cultural and sociological situation is so different: effectively, to do this would be an anachronism. This works well enough for *Art Brut*, and indeed for those forms of Outsider Art that are most faithful to its criteria, such as were the subject of Cardinal's 1972 book. But what do we do about the subsequent development of Outsider Art, as presented in various exhibitions since then in which new artists have been baptised 'Outsider' who would not have qualified as *Art Brut* creators fifty years ago?

In his catalogue essay for the 1979 Outsiders exhibition, Cardinal claimed that: 'Outsider Art acts as its own guarantee: it validates itself to the extent that it is compelling and fascinating, and obliges us to acknowledge its singular intensity, its effect of high voltage.'[13] But the work itself cannot be its own guarantee: no matter how fascinating or surprising it may be, it cannot hoist itself by its own bootstraps. There are other factors involved, such as the life situation of the artist, and, of course, our own preconceptions as to what Outsider Art should consist of, that play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining it. If we take a wider view and consider Outsider Art as a sequel to *Art Brut*, one that has less stringent criteria, then we need to try and set up some internal bulkheads, including circumstantial factors such as

social and psychological isolation and apparent cultural independence, for example, in order to distinguish it from other eccentric art forms. But, given the rapid expansion of the field and the dilution of its specific criteria, even this feels like a rearguard action.

Maybe it is also doomed to failure by the contradictory and perverse character of Outsider Art: like *Art Brut*, it never fits into the profile we have made for it. Sometimes I'm reminded of Groucho Marx's quip that he would never join any club that was prepared to accept him as a member. As Laurent Danchin observes, 'Whether wild or sophisticated in form, true creation will always escape prediction, indifferent to the categories in which we confine it.'[14] How is this 'true creativity' to be recognized, and what else is there about it that might warrant us giving it the label 'Outsider'? Hasn't the term itself become one of the categories that Danchin is referring to? In France, at least, there is a growing constituency of 'dissident' creators who fall outside the rather narrow confines of officially sponsored 'Contemporary Art', 'a very disparate group of "artists", young or old, good or bad, professionals or self-taught, working with drawing, painting, prints, sculpture or assemblage, and in all kinds of performance or assemblage or multimedia activity, in all styles, classical, *brut* or modernist.'[15] It follows that the mere fact of being a member of this largely invisible majority of artists who create their work outside the system, without commercial or governmental support, does not in itself make one an Outsider. Nevertheless, however much of a mirage Outsider Art may be, it acts as a potent symbol for those forms of artistic creativity that are furthest away from official recognition or patronage.

One could go further and say that the label 'Outsider' risks distorting an artist's work, by fetishizing its eccentricity. As several writers have pointed out,[16] there are many artists (such as Hipkiss, Saban or Nedjar) whose work is in some sense marginal, in terms of its idiom, its provenance and its audience; yet they are not Outsiders in any consistent use of the term, even though their work may feature in magazines such as *Raw Vision* or in exhibitions of Outsider Art. Some of them actually dislike being roped into this corral; others (Saban or Nedjar, for example) have artistic careers that

are simply too global and variegated to warrant using the term in any way other than the enthusiastic or the merely promotional. When Herenplaats put on a show called 'Madness' in 2001, in which their artists were shown in a municipal museum, while Hipkiss was shown in the Herenplaats studio, they were trying to question the boundary between normal and handicap art, rather than to suggest that both were 'Outsiders'. In the end protests or criticisms about its use or abuse notwithstanding, the term Outsider will continue to drift, and it may eventually come to function simply as a loose term of approbation, like 'revolutionary' or 'anarchic'.

We have to face the fact that Outsider Art is at a crisis point, and that this is due as much to internal as to external causes. My aim in this book has been to try and get behind the outward and visible symptoms – commercial pressures, territorial disputes and exaggerated claims, for example – and to show the contradictory forces that have shaped and continue to propel it. I have argued that what is really at stake is an underlying, and not always fully conscious, set of conceptions about the nature of authentic artistic creativity. Allied to this are numerous concepts, such as madness, originality, automatism, privacy and even 'authenticity' itself, that need closer examination. Although it is Outsider Art that has brought these into the open and highlighted many of the problems involved, the issues it has dramatized affect the wider art world and, because of its subterranean links with that art world, may also question some of its assumptions.

Ody Saban, *Mes Pages-Livre d'Amour*, 2006, thirteen-page book, mixed media, including natural and artificial flowers, Tarot cards, feathers and paint, 34 x 28 cm. Saban's work, often using found materials, has a thrilling erotic lyricism and deliberately breaks cultural and religious boundaries.

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Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from the French are the author's. In the case of Dubuffet's *Homme du Commun,* the date of the extract itself precedes the book's place and date of publication.

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Artists' Biographies

EUGENE ANDOLSEK (USA, *b.* 1921). Began drawing in 1950, producing numerous drawings based on grids. Stopped in 2003 because of poor eyesight.

CHARLES BENEFIEL (USA, *b.* 1967). Numerous drawings based on systematic visual-numerical code.

NICK BLINKO (UK, *b.* 1961). Has spent intermittent periods in hospital. In the mid-1980s created drawings in sessions lasting up to eight hours at a stretch. First shown in the National Schizophrenia Fellowship exhibition in 1994. Draws in almost microscopic detail. Is also a musician.

GASTON CHAISSAC (France, 1910–1964). Spent most of his life in small provincial villages, working part-time as a cobbler because of ill-health. After being introduced to art in the late 1930s by a couple of Parisian artists, he wrote, drew and painted prolifically on almost any kind of support. His writings were published and his work appreciated, first by Dubuffet and then by a wider audience. He was eventually taken up by the Iris Klert Gallery in 1961, but always maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the art world.

FERDINAND CHEVAL (France, 1836–1924). Worked as a postman. Between 1879 and 1912 he constructed a 'Dream Palace' (Palais Idéal) and, later, his own tomb at Hauterives (Drôme). Cheval was allegedly inspired by the shapes of stones he picked up on his rounds; while he also made drawings, it seems that much of the building was improvised, using a mixture of masonry and forms sculpted directly in cement. From the outset the Palace was intended to become an attraction for visitors. Today it is a national monument.

'CHOMO' [ROGER CHOMEAUX] (France, *b.* 1947). Although he was an art school graduate, he rejected the Fine Art world and constructed his own 'preludian' complex of buildings, sculptures and inscriptions near Fontainebleau.

ALOÏSE CORBAZ (Switzerland, 1886–1964). Worked as governess to an aristocratic family. After beginning to show signs of mental disturbance, she was committed to Céry in 1918. Work after 1936 has been preserved: an extensive output, often on a large scale. Both Dubuffet and her psychiatrist Jacqueline Porret-Forel recognized the exceptional quality of her work and wrote about it. The Collection de l'Art Brut has a substantial holding of her work.

FLEUR-JOSEPH CRÉPIN (France, 1875–1948). Ran a hardware store. Was introduced to Spiritualism in 1930 and began drawing in 1938. He produced more than 300 paintings in a series predicted to coincide with the end of the Second World War (which it did). Also a musician, his work has a marked symmetrical style.

HENRY DARGER (USA, 1882–1973). An orphan and a devout Catholic, he worked as a hospital caretaker and lived alone all his life. Darger typed out a 15,000-page illustrated manuscript 'In the Realms of the Unreal', the story of the seven Vivian girls and their persecution by the Glandelinians, as well as making numerous other drawings. Like many Outsiders, Darger invented his own technique: his pictures, on quite a large scale, were based on tracings from enlarged photographs of illustrations taken from popular magazines, mainly of young girls.

EMMANUEL DERIENNIC ['Le Calligraphe'] (France, 1908–1965). After a couple of brief hospitalizations he started drawing in his fifties.

PAUL DUHEM (Belgium, 1919–1999). An orphan, he worked as an agricultural labourer and was drafted by the Germans during the war. On his return he continued agricultural work. In 1977 he entered La Pommeraie, a Belgian community and studio for the mentally handicapped, where he gradually began drawing and painting a strictly limited range of subjects.

HOWARD FINSTER (USA, 1916–2001). An evangelical preacher, Finster created a Paradise Garden full of sculptures, as well as thousands of paintings intended to broadcast his redemptive message. In later years, because of increasing demand for his work, he was helped in his artistic creations by members of his family.

EUGENE GABRITSCHEVSKY (Russia, 1893–1979). A brilliant physicist, he was committed in 1931, diagnosed with schizophrenia, and never left the hospital. His output consists of about 5,000 small-scale drawings and paintings. Much of his work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

MADGE GILL (UK, 1882–1961). An illegitimate child, she worked as a nurse and was introduced to Spiritualism. She later lost an eye as a result of illness. Under the guidance of her spirit, Myrninerest, she produced many drawings in black and white, often on a large scale, thanks to a system for drawing on rolls of calico. Gill also made some embroideries and improvised at the piano.

JOAQUIM VICENS GIRONELLA (Spain, 1911–1997). An artisan in cork, he made delicate relief carvings. He went into exile in France in 1939 and was discovered by Dubuffet during his days as a wine merchant. Most of his work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

TED GORDON (USA, *b.* 1924). Worked in hospital administration. He now lives in a home with his wife. His drawings began as doodles, but became larger as a result of participating in a therapeutic workshop.

EMMA HAUCK (Germany, 1878–1928). Committed to an asylum: only a few of her drawings survive in the Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

JOHANN HAUSER (Austria, 1926–1996). His impoverished upbringing in a special school left him illiterate and he was given a low IQ. He was first committed in 1942, then transferred to Gugging in 1949, diagnosed manic-depressive. With Dr Leo Navratil's personal encouragement, he produced a considerable output of drawings and prints and became one of the best-known members of the 'House of Artists'.

MAGALI HERRERA (Uruguay, 1914–1992). An autodidact who danced, made films, acted and wrote. Herrera began drawing regularly in 1965, after serious depression and several suicide attempts: she did eventually end her own life. Most of her work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

CHRIS HIPKISS (UK, *b.* 1964). An autodidact, he works almost exclusively on large-scale black and white drawings.

JOSEF HOFER (Germany, *b.* 1945). Brought up with his equally handicapped brother in a protective family environment, he spent most of his time on a farm. In 1985 he started living in a day hospital for the handicapped in Upper Austria. He has little or no speech, but draws prolifically, using a mirror for his self-portraits.

'JURA' [ALFRED ANTONÍN JURITSKY] (1887–1961). A well-educated prince, Jura fled to France in 1938. Towards the end of the 1940s he began collecting interestingly shaped flints, which he adapted with a few touches to look like human faces. His work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

MARC LAMY (France, *b.* 1939). His parents were glassmakers and he attended art school. He became interested in mysticism, had various jobs, married and divorced, and eventually worked with Algerian delinquents. As a result of stress, he was hospitalized briefly in 1988 and began to draw that same year.

CARL LANGE (Germany, 1852–after 1900). After working as a salesman, he was committed to a West Prussian asylum. His work is in the Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

AUGUSTIN LESAGE (France, 1876–1954). Born into a family of coalminers, at the age of thrity-five, when working down the mine, he heard a voice telling him he would become an artist, although he did not stop working as a miner until 1923. He produced about 800 paintings under Spiritualist influence. He even once gave a public painting demonstration for the Institut Métapsychique in Paris. His works are represented in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

RAPHAEL LONNÉ (France, 1910–1969). Postman. Lonné came under Spiritualist influence in the late 1940s, creating works on a small scale in the evenings. Also a poet and musician, after retirement he worked on a larger scale and also distanced himself from his previous beliefs. Represented in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

ALBERT LOUDEN (UK, *b.* 1943). Van driver. Louden approached Victor Musgrave after seeing the 1979 Outsiders exhibition: his subsequent one-man show at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 1985 was a sell-out.

DWIGHT MACKINTOSH (USA, 1906–1999). Sent to a mental hospital aged 16, he was released into the community fifty years later, and began attending the Creative Growth Arts Center in Oakland, California. Retarded and apparently illiterate, he produced a large number of drawings, but seemed indifferent to their exhibition.

PASCAL-DÉSIR MAISONNEUVE (France, 1863–1934). Ran a junk shop. Bought a job lot of shells from which he created sculptures of faces. Most of his work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

HEINRICH-ANTON MUELLER (Switzerland, 1865–1930). A vine-worker who patented a vine-trimming machine. Committed to a psychiatric hospital in his forties (no diagnosis survives), he began making complicated perpetual motion machines and then produced some extraordinarily eccentric drawings and texts. His work had an evident influence on Dubuffet.

J. B. MURRAY (USA, 1908–1988). A plantation worker. In his seventies he had a religious experience, as a result of which he began drawing and writing in an indecipherable script.

MICHEL NEDJAR (France, *b.* 1947). Followed in his father's tailoring business. Began making dolls in 1975. He has since travelled widely and made fims, drawings and three-dimensional work as an independent artist, achieving an international reputation.

RICHARD NIE (UK, *b.* 1954). Suffered from serious depression. Works as a part-time gardener. Draws and plays the guitar at night. Has attended part-time art classes, but is essentially self-taught.

LAURE PIGEON (France, 1882–1965). After her marriage broke down in 1933, she drew alone under Spiritualist inspiration. Most of her work, meticulously dated, was discovered after her death and is now principally in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

VALERIE POTTER (UK, *b.* 1954). Self-taught. Has been committed for several psychotic episodes, but now lives and works independently.

MARTÍN RAMÍREZ (Mexico/USA, 1895–1963). A Mexican ranchero who came to seek his fortune in the USA, working on the railroad, amongst other jobs. Ramírez was committed in 1931 and transferred to DeWitt in 1948, where his work was discovered in 1951 by Dr Pasto. It seems that Ramírez never spoke, except on the rare occasions when one of his family visited. The two or three hundred drawings that survive are often on a large scale.

HEINRICH REISENBAUER (Austria, *b.* 1938). Committed to Gugging. Makes large drawings of near-identical and formalized objects.

SIMON RODIA (USA, 1875–1965). An Italian immigrant, Rodia constructed a total of nine towers on a small plot in Watts, Los Angeles, where they still stand, using an armature of steel rods coated with concrete and set with broken crockery. In 1954 he quit the area, and signed the towers over to a neighbour.

ODY SABAN (*b.* 1953). Of mixed Turkish and Jewish origin, she trained as an art teacher and eventually moved to Paris in 1977. She works in a variety of media, and has lived in a wide range of settings, including squats: her work is colourful and vividly erotic, as well as deliberately combining elements from different cultures.

JOHANN SCHEIBÖCK (Austria, 1905–?). Farmer. A member of the House of Artists at Gugging, he made simple, child-like drawings of farm machinery and animals.

ARMAND SCHULTHESS (Switzerland, 1901–1972). Businessman. He retired to three acres of land at Auressio, near Locarno, where he accumulated an encyclopaedic mass of information on all subjects and constructed a carefully organized 'garden of knowledge'. Sadly his domain has been seriously vandalized since his death.

JUDITH SCOTT (USA, 1943–2005). Born with severe Down's Syndrome and consequently no language, at the age of seven she was removed from her family and spent the next 36 years in various institutions until she was rescued in 1986 by her twin sister. Soon after she was enrolled at the Creative Growth Arts Center in Oakland, California, where she began to make her signature fibre sculptures.

LOUIS SOUTTER (Switzerland, 1871–1942. Trained as artist and taught art in America, but developed psychological problems on his return to Europe. Was committed to an old people's home in 1923, where he gradually began working in a completely new, much rougher, style.

JEANNE TRIPIER (France, 1869–1944). Became involved in Spiritualism at the age of fifty-eight. In 1934 was committed to the Maison Blanche, near Paris. Her surviving work consists of notebooks, drawings and embroideries. Most of her work is in the Collection de l'Art Brut.

OSWALD TSCHIRTNER (Austria, 1920–2007). He was first committed in 1945 as a result of traumatic war experiences. In 1954 he was transferred to Gugging, where he became a well-known member of the 'House of Artists'. A very meek and passive person, he drew only in the presence of his doctor, Leo Navratil.

WILLEM VAN GENK (Belgium, 1927–2005). Orphaned and institutionalized in a home for the handicapped (whom he despised), he nevertheless travelled widely in his imagination, thanks to exhaustive research conducted through magazines, travel guides and plans. He drew, painted and made constructions, mostly about transport systems, but political ideologies and contemporary issues also form a substantial component in his work. Much of his work is in the Stadshof collection in the Museum Dr Guislain in Ghent.

OSCAR VOLL (Germany, 1876–after 1935). Tailor. Drew in thick graphite, mainly in small notebooks. His work is in the Prinzhorn Collection.

VONN STROPP (UK, *b.* 1962). When eleven years old he had a series of mystical experiences. Worked as cleaner for British Airways. He has had no art education and is entirely self-taught. In his early twenties he began drawing and painting, in excruciating detail, under a kind of dictation.

LOUIS WAIN (UK, 1860–1939). After art school he became well known for his anthropomorphic cat pictures. First committed in 1924, he ended up in Napsbury Hospital. The notorious sequence of cat pictures is in the Bethlem Museum, Beckenham, Kent.

AUGUST WALLA (Austria, 1936–2001). He lived with his mother but, after suicide attempts and setting fire to his house, was committed from 1952 to 1957. He was eventually admitted to Gugging in 1970 and lived in the House of Artists, together with his mother, from 1986. Painted and drew all over walls, and other surfaces: prolific output.

SCOTTIE WILSON (UK, 1890–1972). A freelance eccentric, he began drawing in his forties and was taken up by galleries towards the end of his life. He was given some commercial commissions for pottery decoration.

ADOLF WÖLFLI (Switzerland, 1864–1930). Orphaned at the age of eight, he did itinerant farmwork and labouring jobs, and served in the army. Arrested for child molestation, he was committed to Waldau asylum in 1899. Owing to his violence, he was allotted his own cell in 1917. Created a colossal output of more than forty home-made books and thousands of drawings. The largest holding of his work is in the Wölfli Collection, Bern.

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A fascination with works of art that are in some way beyond the pale is almost by definition a lonely affair: its solitary and obstinate nature echoes the isolation and secrecy of many of the 'Outsiders' who originally created them. There must be something contrary or even perverse about wanting to travel so far off the beaten track, and I can certainly recognize my own need to escape from a familial and cultural tradition that felt conservative in every sense. Nevertheless, along the way I have encountered kindred spirits, and I am extremely grateful to a number of people for having generously fed my interest and tolerated my impatience: they include Peter Byrne, Roger Cardinal, Jos ten Berge, Laurent Danchin, Clayton Eshleman, Monika Jagfeld, John MacGregor, Monika Kinley, Lucienne Peiry, Frederik de Preester, Guy Roux, Michel Thévoz and John Maizels. The late Genevieve Roulin's friendship and enthusiasm was a wonderful example to me. Other people, including Brooke Anderson, Bruno Decharme, Johann Feilacher, Carine Fol, Janos Marton, John Holt and Colin Rhodes have helped me focus my thoughts, even if they did not always agree with them. Finally, without Thomas Röske's encouragement to republish some of the various articles I had published over the years, this book might never have been put together. I am also grateful to Michael Leaman of Reaktion for having shown a personal interest in this topic. A number of collectors, gallery owners and curators have been kind enough to provide material for the illustrations without charge: they include James Brett, Henry Boxer, Sam and Betsy Farber, Anthony Petullo, Philippe Eternod, Daniel Baumann and Elisabeth Telsnig. Julia Elmore was particularly helpful with some of these contacts. Friends and students over the years have also reminded me both of the excitement and fascination these strange works generate and of the awkward questions that they raise. The field of Outsider Art invites controversy and polemics even more than most art topics: but whatever faults or exaggerations this book contains must in the end remain my responsibility.

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