



BRUT T



BXL

4 lieux | locaties
8 expo's

collection
Bruno
Decharme

P H O T O

Losing oneself in the labyrinth of the gaze

PHOTO | BRUT #1
*collection Bruno Decharme
& installation vidéo Angel Vergara*

Since the *Mindscales* (2012) exhibition, shows that create dialogues between insider and outsider art have taken place at CENTRALE for contemporary art (*Distant Proximity, Connected, Bxl Universel I, Roger Ballen and Ronny Delrue, Traces de l'invisible*). Taking part in the PHOTO | BRUT BXL project was hence an obvious decision. The project links two axes of CENTRALE's programming: collaboration with several Brussels partner institutions and the invitation to a Brussels artist in the person of Angel Vergara. Constituted of two components - Angel Vergara's video installation and a selection of works from the rich collection of Bruno Decharme - the exhibition unfolds through a labyrinthine scenography, standing as a metaphor for a reflection and a gaze that constantly change.

For several decades, the film-maker and producer Bruno Decharme has been one of the major collectors of art brut in Europe and worldwide. His recent donation of nearly 1000 works to Centre Georges Pompidou further confirms his role as a discoverer and distributor. Since the establishment of the 'abcd-art brut' association, Bruno Decharme and Barbara Safarova have not only assembled a body of remarkable works, held exhibitions and published books, they have also succeeded in bringing together researchers, curators and artists to nurture the debate and reflection on art brut, or outsider art. Nearly a century after Jean Dubuffet, who invented the notion of art brut and set up a rich collection that has been on display since 1976 in Lausanne, the work of abcd has been a part of the current trend of

breaking down the barriers around outsider art. By honouring the medium of photography, the association is simply expanding the scope of discovery of innovative practices.

In order to understand the impact of this development, it is useful to look back at the genesis of art brut. It was in the wake of the Second World War that the French artist Jean Dubuffet brought about a paradigm shift by inventing the notion of art brut (outsider art) and establishing the collection by that name. Like the Expressionists and Surrealists before him, Dubuffet was fascinated by works that he considered to be “a very immediate and direct projection of what goes on in the very depths of a human being.” Art brut, which is not psychopathological art, is a term applied to a very wide range of works coming out of a psychiatric or correctional institutional setting, works of spiritualist mediums and creations by self-taught artists who are on the margins of official art circles and often of society itself. Jean Dubuffet’s “invention”, which eliminates the stigma around the link between art and madness, is intended chiefly to respond to its virulent attack on the cultural establishment. His symbolic and subjective vision of outsider artists results from the dialectic of opposition. Dubuffet became the defender of a series of creators whom he considered more authentic than their professional colleagues. His attitude, which unquestionably reflects a true and sincere fascination with creations by “the common person”, also stresses the power of the decision-maker. It was he and the few people around him at the *Compagnie de l’Art Brut*, who defined the direction to take and selected the artists. His approach brought into the limelight these “authors” (he did not call them artists), who often emerged very reluctantly from a form of anonymity within an anti-cultural ghetto. By bringing together works that seemed to have no rational common denominator other than an aversion to the cultural system in place, and in the name of authenticity and expressive force, Dubuffet undeniably brought about one of the major upheavals in 20th-century art. Following in the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp’s ‘ready-made’, the art brut promoted by Dubuffet shifts the boundaries of the artwork and the status of the artist. He sought to find “true art” where one least expected it. But whilst he was convinced that the revelation of art brut would shake up the cultural world, the opposite happened, since the boundaries between insider and outsider art (the term most widely used today) became more and more porous. Works classified as outsider art came to be ever more integrated into the official art circuit. Yet it must be recognized that the approach to outsider art is still often focused on the existential elements and life courses of its creators. This brings a limit to the analysis of the subject and gives rise to questions of a social or psychological nature that could, in fact, apply equally to professional artists.

Whereas in recent years we have seen the end of dichotomous reading and a breaking down of the ghetto of outsider creators, the role and power of decision-makers (museum directors, collectors, exhibition curators, gallerists) remain omnipotent. In the end, it is not the creators who give themselves the status of marginal artists. This is the stumbling block of this category, around which the discourse on the artwork constantly oscillates between the art of the subject (its creator) and the art of the object (the work). For, unlike “professional” artists, who create with a view to a potential and necessary relationship with the viewer, the creators of art brut do not always seek this link. This is clear from the number of creators who wish to remain anonymous. This distinctive feature confers a major decision-making power on the collector, and so it is the latter whom we have sought to place at the heart of the PHOTO | BRUT BXL project at CENTRALE for contemporary art.

After *Private Choices* (2017), an exhibition which presented a choice of works stemming from 11 Brussels collectors, it is now a passionate amateur who, by his own admission, considers himself to be a researcher as well, who is being highlighted. And through the collector, the power of the decision-maker and the boundaries of art brut are called into question. To our great delight, Bruno Decharme is a collector who shares his passion for art brut, for he is convinced that the works in his collection, which by the way were not always created in order to be exhibited, gain their meaning by being seen by the public.

But let us get back to the exhibition's trajectory, which begins with the work of the multidisciplinary Brussels artist Angel Vergara. When we invited him, his first response was to engage in a dialogue with film-maker, producer and art brut collector Bruno Decharme, and create a video painting. The work takes the form of a diptych made of excerpts of films devoted to artists in his collection and of a filmed interview with the collector surrounded by works in his collection. Using a process he developed many years ago, which consists of painting on a transparent base (glass, plexiglass, screen), Vergara questions the link between the filmed and the painted images, between the image reproduced by the camera lens and those by the paintbrush. The symbiosis of video images and pictorial lines in movement incarnates the complexity of the rhizomatic thought of the collector/researcher/film-maker. Vergara's work is characterized by the interaction between the medium and the material, which offers new critical modes of meaning based on multiple forms of dialogue both physical and visual. Since the late 1980s, he has been questioning the concepts and notions that govern the scope of contemporary art, by exporting them to the field of social and collective life. He created and embodied the figure of *Straatman* (the man in the street) by covering himself with a white canvas. This ghost-like body haunts public places and installations in the form of fictitious cafés or exhibition halls, where he performs his act. Under the canvas, the artist enacts and draws the mental projection of a moment, creating a graphic composition that reveals the context in which *Straatman* performs. *Straatman* is a living shape that, like a seismograph, scrutinizes, hears, feels and transcribes what he perceives. He experiments with visual and auditory interactions in specific, emblematic contexts of society (in the street) and in the art world. This presence/absence allows him to engage in a unique dialogue without trapping him in a position of authority. He places himself at the level of his interlocutors and enters into perfect connection with them. By these actions, he explores both the role of the artist and the impact of the psycho-sensorial experience of art. His exploration of the less elitist segments of society and culture, as well as of the ties between art and life, resonate with the fundamental precepts of art brut.

In the second part of the trajectory, the viewer is invited to stroll through a labyrinthine scenography built out of parts of scaffolding. Simultaneously open and closed, and open to infinite modification, this space becomes a metaphor for an intuitive and cognitive thought that is in constant evolution and that governs the gaze of the collector, the artist and the viewer. It symbolizes a mode of thinking that proceeds by way of reformulated conjectures, attempts and hypotheses that are constantly tested, as is the narrative about art brut. Whilst the labyrinth contains a selection of photos, prints, polaroids, photographic collages, the peripheral spaces are made up of works based on photographic sources.

By combining all these creations within his collection, under the title PHOTO | BRUT, Bruno Decharme has made it possible to discover unprecedented self-taught practices. Already back in 2005, Roger Cardinal inventoried a series of photographs by autodidacts which offered "an authentic and unsophisticated vision of their entourage and their life world". These snapshots "created by necessity, without much care for technique, in a sometimes almost compulsive accumulation, are located far from a platitude or stock phrase, far from a cliché. "A way of differentiating the photographs of amateurs, whose production of images sometimes exhibit the same characteristics of accumulation when they create family photos, holiday memories or sunsets."

Like the *Mindscares* (2010) exhibition, PHOTO | BRUT #1 offers a subjective and intuitive exploration at the heart of the photographic representation of the mental world, of reflection, of the loss of the self, and of the relationship between the being and their environment. The photographic image is seen as a very personal interface between reality and the imaginary, the perceptible and the imperceptible.

As such, PHOTO | BRUT allows for a questioning of the distinctive link between photography and the notions of reality and truth. For since it is considered largely as the instantaneous reflection of reality, it also constitutes a privileged medium to transcribe everything that escapes the human gaze and the rational mind. This is the case when it intervenes in spiritualistic practices, fixing the fluid radiation of living bodies or even of thought. It thus appears well-suited to capturing "meta-realist" phenomena. PHOTO | BRUT incarnates this

“meta-reality”, for the photos and compositions made up of photographic materials are all mental images that surpass retinal reality.

All these anonymous or presumed artists use photography below or above its supposed objectivity. They capture their phantasies, manias, fears, idiosyncratic worlds and sublimate a profane subject, visualizing a form of imaginary transfiguration of reality.

Via self-portraits, erotic photos, medium-like photographs, archival images, etc., these are all moving stories that defy the dictates of censorship and of the trends that are revealed. The photographed bodies reveal themselves, in sometimes immodest ways, in images that are sometimes awkward, sometimes carefully chosen, but always highly intimate in content. The photographic image becomes the extension of the eye, of consciousness and/or of the unconscious. It is the way to speak, to speak of oneself, of disconnecting or rejecting, of challenging or escaping oneself, but most of all, it is literally or metaphorically the self-portrait of the photographer.

Some pursue an obsessive dream, while others try to discern what is real or reject the world around us, and still others create an archive of time and capture the vision of what they dream of becoming, all of them creating a narrative of a more or less idiosyncratic quest for truth or of its revelation within a personal mythology.

In an image, it is not the visible that is decisive but rather the observer’s form of grouping the subject. And this is what this PHOTO | BRUT #1 exhibition offers, through a selection of photographs from Bruno Decharme’s collection and of video paintings by Angel Vergara. It invites us to an intense experience that also calls into question the ambiguity of the “marginal” origin of these creations and the categorization of their creators. It invites us to immerse ourselves in the labyrinth of all these gazes.

Carine Fol
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