In early 1945, just months after the Liberation, the French artist and writer Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) began his search for examples of art brut, or, as he would come to define it, art produced by untrained, isolated, or illiterate individuals “unscathed by artistic culture.”¹ In June of 1948, Dubuffet, along with five others—Jean Paulhan (a writer, linguist, and Editor of the La Nouvelle Revue Française), André Breton, Charles Ratton (a Parisian dealer in African art), Michel Tapié (an art critic), and Henri-Pierre Roché (a translator, journalist, and novelist)—officially established in Paris La Compagnie de l’art brut, an association dedicated to the discovery, documentation, and exhibition of art brut. Later that summer the Compagnie’s “Foyer de l’Art Brut,” or exhibition space, was transferred from the basement of the Galerie René Drouin, located on the Place Vendôme, to a pavilion in the garden area behind the offices of the Éditions Gallimard publishing house, 17 rue de l’Université. The relocated Foyer de l’Art Brut was opened to the public on September 7, 1948, and a little over two months later, Claude Lévi-Strauss attended the opening of a show dedicated to the work of Joachim Vicens Gironella, an autodidact Catalonian artist who had spent a year (1939–1940) in a French internment camp near Braum.²

Shortly thereafter Dubuffet exchanged letters with Lévi-Strauss. Here, courtesy of the Fondation Dubuffet, Paris, and the Musée de l’Art Brut, Lausanne, they are published for the first time, along with a translation of Dubuffet’s “Honneur aux valeurs sauvages [In Honor of Savage Values],” a lecture delivered to “La Faculté de Lettres de Lille” (Faculty of Literature, University of Lille, France), January 10, 1951, on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition, “Cinq petits inventeurs de la peinture [Five Little Inventors of Painting] (Paul End/Alcide/Liber/Gasduf/Sylvocq),” at the Marcel Evrard bookstore, 7 Place de Béthune.³ The letters mark an important but overlooked intersection between one of the key figures of the postwar avant-garde and the founder of structural anthropology. Read in conjunction with Dubuffet’s “Savage Values,” they can help us better understand the idea of art brut, its relation to the rise of Structuralism, and its place within the broader spectrum of postwar French thought.

At the time of their meeting, Lévi-Strauss was a recently appointed professor at the Institut d’Ethnologie of the Université de Paris, and a research associate at the National Science Research Center, Paris. He returned to Paris for good at the end of 1947 after spending the war years teaching at the New School for Social Research, New York (1942–1945), and then briefly serving as a cultural advisor to the French Embassy in Washington, D.C. By his own admission, Lévi-Strauss’s experiences in New York had an immense influence on the development of his groundbreaking methodology. The similarly dispossessed structural linguist Roman Jakobson inspired Lévi-Strauss to approach art and myths diacritically and look for meaning not in real-world referents, but rather in the appearance of differential structures within a “limited set of conceptual oppositions.” The émigré Surrealists, who landed in New York around the same time, bolstered Lévi-Strauss’s belief in the productive role of authorial passivity and implausible juxtapositions in the creative process. And from the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, via his installation and organization of the Northwest

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¹ I would like to thank Sophie Webel, Director of the Fondation Dubuffet in Paris, and Lucienne Peiry and Vincent Monat at the Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland, for making this material available and giving me permission to publish it; Francesco Pellizzi and Nuit Banai at Res for their enthusiasm, guidance, and editorial expertise; Denis Hollier, Adam Jolles, Laurence Gobin, and Gini Alhadef for reading and commenting on earlier versions of my essay and translations; and finally, the faculty and graduate students of the Department of Art History at Northwestern University for inviting me to present some of this material in the form of a lecture at the “Art and Image” Symposium, April 23–24, 2004.


³ These five individuals were patients of Dr. Paul Bernard at the hospital in Saint-André-lez-Lille. Their full names are as follows: Gaston Dufour (Gasduf), Paul End, Sylvain Lec (Sylvocq), Stanislas Lib (Liber), and Alcide. Unlike Dubuffet’s other major pronouncements on art brut, “In Honor of Savage Values” was not immediately published. It eventually appeared in Prospectus I (Paris: Gallimard, 1967):203–224. However, this should not be taken as a sign of Dubuffet’s indifference toward the text. He went out of his way to include it in a later, more condensed anthology of his literary corpus, L’homme du commun à l’ouvrage, ed. Jacques Berne (Paris: Gallimard, 1973):93–118. The text of the lecture has been slightly abridged here.
Coast Indian Gallery in the American Museum of Natural History, Lévi-Strauss gained a new appreciation for the synchronic, non-hierarchical arrangement of ethnographic data.4

Also, during his stay in New York Lévi-Strauss putatively lost interest in “so-called professional art,” and began to collect objects which might conceivably fall under Dubuffet’s rubric of art brut. In a short autobiographical article entitled “New York in 1941” (1943), Lévi-Strauss warmly recounts the hours he spent with Max Ernst, André Breton (whom he had befriended in 1940, on the boat from Marseilles to Fort-de-France, Martinique), and Georges Duthuit wandering through New York’s heterogeneous neighborhoods in search of neglected masterpieces and overlooked treasures. In particular, Lévi-Strauss recalls “a small antique shop on Third Avenue which, in response to our demand became Ali Baba’s cave.”5 In terms similar to those employed by Dubuffet in “Savage Values,” Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the auratic power of art untouched by the demands of the market and the encroachments of what T. W. Adorno would call “the culture industry.” Such works, Lévi-Strauss contends, challenge received notions about taste, value, and beauty: “One surrounds oneself with these objects not because they are beautiful, but because, since beauty has become inaccessible to all but the very rich, they offer, in its place, a sacred character—and thus one is, by the way, led to wonder about the ultimate nature of aesthetic emotion.”6 By 1948, as the correspondence suggests, Lévi-Strauss had also taken an interest in art made by prisoners. He advises Dubuffet, in his expanding search for examples of art brut, to contact Mr. Putrot d’Alleaume, secretary general of the International Congress of Criminology, Paris. In his response Dubuffet seems very interested in the idea, but as far as we know, he never followed up on it. This, we can assume, had to do with Dubuffet’s ongoing efforts to disassociate art brut from other previously “discovered” forms of marginalized art, including the art of criminals, children’s art, naïve art, primitive art, folk art, and the art of the insane.7 Art brut, by definition, is art without precedent.

Five months prior to his rendezvous with Lévi-Strauss at the Foyer de l’Art Brut, Dubuffet returned from the second of three trips he would take to Algeria between 1947–19498 (fig. 1). These voyages were in effect self-imposed exiles replete with ethnographic overtones. Unfortunately, the relation of these trips to Dubuffet’s concomitant conceptualization, theorization, and promulgation of art brut has been neglected by art historians.9 During his second trip to North Africa Dubuffet carried several Carnets de croquis (small, ruled notebooks) in which he took notes, drew pictures of the


local inhabitants, and in keeping with a longstanding ethnographic practice, attempted to learn local dialects and expressions by phonetically transcribing them in his mother tongue. This experience led Dubuffet to look at his own language in a new light, and consequently, to write his “Textes en jargon”—a series of short, whimsical récits composed in a French so orthographically incorrect they must be read aloud to be understood (the first of these, *Le dale canpane* [The Air of the Countryside, spelled phonetically] was published by Dubuffet and his wife, Lili, under the auspices of *les publications de l’Art Brut*, in December of 1948). As Dubuffet later explained to Raymond Queneau:

> For three years I studied very assiduously an Arabic dialect spoken by the Bedouins of the Sahara, and I began by writing this language phonetically in Latin characters; the very strange appearance of the grammatical forms which resulted from it caused me to see that our spoken language is as remote from written language as this Saharan dialect can be from literary Arabic, and that our language written phonetically by a foreigner in the same way as I wrote the spoken language in El Goléa, presented grammatical forms as strange (and as fascinating) as my Arabic jargon. It is then that the idea came to me to try to draft a small text written phonetically. I had the feeling that by becoming accustomed to writing (and thinking) in this way, one would be compelled to discover a very interesting species of art, and I am completely passionate about this undertaking.11

These experimental writings demonstrate the proximity, in Dubuffet’s mind, of art brut and écriture brute. Dubuffet never tired of reminding his readers that “the wind of art brut blows on writing as well as on other avenues of artistic creation.”12

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10. A large portion of one of these notebooks, which has the image of a sailing ship and the word “Navigator” [Navigator] embossed on its cover, has been reproduced in the exhibition catalogue, *Jean Dubuffet, voyages au Sahara* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995). An example of Dubuffet’s transcription of Arabic into phonetic French can be found in the hors-série *Beaux Arts Collection* dedicated to Dubuffet (Paris, 2001), p. 15.


In some respects Dubuffet's story is an old one; he was not the first French modernist to travel to North Africa in search of artistic inspiration. In going there he was consciously following in the footsteps of the painters Delacroix, Fromentin, and Matisse, and the literary luminaries Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, Maupassant, and Gide. Yet, at the same time, Dubuffet's visits to Algeria and the art he produced while there remain historically specific insofar as they relate to the paradoxical status of postwar French ethnology in the face of decolonization. At certain points in his travels Dubuffet's attitude toward the Saharan Bedouins is reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss's treatment of the Nambikwara Indians in Brazil, as described in "A Writing Lesson," chapter 28 of *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Dubuffet, like Lévi-Strauss, apparently provided the "natives" with pencils and paper and encouraged them to draw. In one of Dubuffet's aforementioned travel notebooks, there are two examples of drawings "made by an Arab"(fig. 2). Ben Yahia, the individual who created these drawings clearly tried to imitate Dubuffet's style. Yahia's drawings are, in effect, imitations of imitations, given that Dubuffet's goal while traveling in North Africa was to "paint as an Arab." These images can be thought of as concrete examples of what Homi K. Bhabha calls colonial "mimicry," wherein the "recognizable Other" becomes "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite." Again, one is immediately reminded of Levi-Strauss's account of the Nambikwara chief who, by mimicking the actions of the ethnographer, produces imitation writing—a tale which, Jacques Derrida claims, smacks of "ethnocentrism thinking itself as anti-ethnocentrism."17

At other times Dubuffet's mindset is closer to Roland Barthes's as revealed in *The Empire of Signs* (1970), a semiological account of his travels in Japan. Dubuffet, like Barthes, frequently finds himself confronted with letters, signs, or inscriptions that are inaccessible, indecipherable, or meaningless to him. For example, in a letter to Jacques Berne mailed from Algeria, Dubuffet marvels at the desert as a chaotic palimpsest, filled with marks and signs "like an immense notebook of disorganization, a notebook of improvisation . . . an elementary school blackboard full of scribbles . . ." He emphasizes that these unintelligible marks and signs, like the Bedouins' footprints, "are not preserved very long." Above all, Dubuffet was fascinated by what he perceived to be the Bedouin's nomadic nature, the impermanence of their existence, and their inability to leave permanent traces. Transitory lives, ephemeral inscriptions—in short, the Bedouins seemed to offer living proof of one of Dubuffet's pet ideas: "Man Writes on Sand" (fig. 3).

Initially, Dubuffet's conception of the ideal art brut artist equated to a heroized *l'homme commun* [common man] or *l'homme dans la rue* [man in the street]. However, during his stays in North Africa this

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Figure 2. Jean Dubuffet, Carnet de Croquis El Goléa III, March 1948, Ink on paper, 22 x 17 cm (the size of the notebook), with a pencil and henna drawing by Ben Yahia glued on page 18. Private collection.
Figure 3. Jean Dubuffet, *Arabs and Footprints*, January–April, 1948, gouache on paper, 42 x 32 cm. Private collection.
ideal merged with an exoticization of the "clowns of the desert"—the name Dubuffet shamelessly gave to the Sahara’s indigenous inhabitants. These two ideals, the "common man" and the "desert clown," coalesced in the figure of Gaston Chaissac, an artist, writer, and shoe repairman of Arab descent living in Vendée, France. In July of 1947, while still in Algeria, Dubuffet penned a preface for Chaissac’s exhibition of drawings at the “L’Arc-en-Ciel” Gallery, Paris (June 11–July 5, 1947). In it he compares Chaissac to Yahia, a Bedouin flute player (fig. 4). Chaissac’s art, Dubuffet contends, is as illegible to "our excellent missionaries of art" as Yahia’s music is to Western musicographers. By the end of his final trip in 1949, Dubuffet’s exoticization of North Africa and its inhabitants begins to wane. At first Dubuffet describes El Goléa as a “bath of simplicities,” a “refreshing” and “rejuvenating” edenic oasis inhabited by men of “grace and beauty.” Later, in a letter to Jean Paulhan, he describes the desert as a “bath of discomforts and annoyances.” In the same letter he realizes the watercolors he has painted during his stay in the Sahara are “general and ideallic,” and have nothing to do with “the reality of [his] surroundings.” He declares, “I have for the moment renounced the descriptive art of exoticisms.” The day after his return to Paris Dubuffet wrote to Jacques Berne: “The Occidental man is not so bad. . . . Not bad at all, the brave Aryan . . . I’m not unhappy to be living with him again.” Dubuffet starts to believe, as he clearly states in “Savage Values,” that one need not go outside of Europe in order to find truly “savage” individuals: “. . . These savage values to which I attribute more value than all others, appear to show themselves, in our worlds of Europe and America, more forcefully and tempestuously than in all other worlds. . . .”

These three versions of Dubuffet’s archetypal art brut artist—the common man, the desert clown, and the “savage” European—share a common denominator. To Dubuffet’s mind, all three have escaped written history. Dubuffet’s original conception of art brut, then, was not only about the discovery, collection, and display of obsolete, overlooked, or “polemical” objects, it was also an attempt to write their makers into history, a kind of counter-historical literary project on par with those two great unrealized prewar attempts at subverting

Figure 4. Photograph of Jean Dubuffet and local musicians in the Sahara Desert, ca. 1948. Private collection.

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traditional historicism and reigning notions of progress while simultaneously bringing to light the marginal, trivial, or "outmoded" remains of bourgeois culture: Walter Benjamin's Passagen-Werk [Arcades Project] (1927-1940), and Raymond Queneau's Encyclopédie des sciences inexactes [Encyclopedia of Inexact Sciences] (1934). In fact, the idea of writing a history of art brut and its creators preceded the actual collection of art brut objects. Dubuffet received approval from the publisher Gaston Gallimard to create a series of journals under the title L'Art Brut before he went searching for art brut in Switzerland in July 1945. As he admitted to one interviewer in 1976: "I had no idea of collecting. I was only interested in publishing the material." Although Gallimard eventually reneged on the contract, Dubuffet continued to publish articles on individual art brut artists. The official Fascicules de l'Art Brut did not see the light of day until the mid-1960s.

In the 1930s Dubuffet wanted to write a series of biographies of unknown, average, "non-illustrious" men. To a certain degree he accomplished this goal in the postwar period with his publication of biographically based texts on individual art brut artists. Yet, given the fact that the majority of these artists were homeless, institutionalized, or amnesic, Dubuffet (and the other authors who contributed to the Fascicules de l'Art brut) had to give them truncated pseudonyms and imaginatively piece together their biographical narratives. The end result was a strange genre of art historical writing—a veritable history of art without "names," "dates," or "histories." For example, in his 1947 entry on an anonymous sculptor associated with the Swiss collector O.J. Müller, Dubuffet writes:

> Every piece of information about these statues is totally useless. . . . What import is it to us if their author was a bureaucrat or a cowherd, an old man or a young person? It is very unfounded to pay attention to these meager circumstances. There is no difference between an old and young man. Not the least in any domain. Or if he was from Burgundy or Auvergne it's the same. And if he is alive or dead for who knows how long it is the same to us. Between a contemporary and someone from the last century, or a companion of Clovis or the big prehistoric reptiles—no difference whatsoever. We are completely wrong to take interest in these details.

The quasi-ethnographic nature of Dubuffet's trips to North Africa is not surprising considering he studied ethnography in Paris in the 1920s. At the same time, he frequented André Masson's studio at 45 rue Blomet, a meeting ground for the "dissident" surrealists Georges Limbour, Michel Leiris, and Georges Bataille, all of whom were later involved in Documents, the avant-garde journal dedicated to blurring the boundaries among "archéologie-beaux arts-ethnographie." (Lévi-Strauss, while not yet an ethnographer, contributed an article on Picasso to Documents, Vol. II, no. 3, 1930). In choosing "Documents" for the title of their journal these authors announced their anti-aesthetic intentions; the journal, in other words, was not going to be another Gazette des beaux-arts or Gazette des beaux-arts primitifs. Further, Documents implied a critique of current museological practices, which tended to sublimate ethnographic documents and dissociate them from—to paraphrase Walter Benjamin—their "ritual value."

As is evinced in "Savage Values," Dubuffet's ideas about art brut were also inherently critical of the museum as a cultural institution. He often referred to

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28. For the full story see, Peiry, Art Brut, pp. 35-104, 125-176.

29. A few of these biographies have been reprinted in Prospectus III, pp. 175-185.


33. Dubuffet was especially close to Masson, Leiris, and Limbour. For more on this, see his letter to Jacques Berne dated February 8, 1947, in Lettres à J.B., pp. 6-8. See also, André Masson, "45, rue Blomet," in Rebelle du surréalisme (Paris: Hermann, 1968):76-76.

34. Levi-Strauss ghost-wrote the piece for his then boss, Georges Monnet. The article has been translated as "Picasso and Cubism," in October 60 (Spring 1992):51-52.


36. For more on Dubuffet's critique of the museum see the following texts included in Prospectus IV: "Dubuffet au Musée" (pp. 23-24), the undated letter to Florence Gould (pp. 542-543), and the letter to Paolo Marinotti, January 1, 1967 (pp. 218-220). In Asphyxiante Culture (1968) Dubuffet overtly criticizes Malraux, who by then had committed the ultimate sin (in Dubuffet's opinion) of accepting the state position of minister of culture. See Dubuffet, Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings, trans. Carol Volk (New York:
works of art brut as “documents,” and likewise wanted to prevent them from being over-aestheticized. Whereas Lévi-Strauss came to anticipate the day the masks, costumes, and totem poles of the Indians of the Northwest coast would be “moved from the ethnographic to fine arts museums,” Dubuffet hoped instead to shield ethnographic works from the tentacles of “cultural art” by absorbing some of them into his collection of art brut. To this end he often searched ethnographic museums for examples of art brut. In the summer of 1945, Dubuffet visited Mr. Eugène Pittard, curator of the Musée d’Éthnographie de la Ville de Genève and asked for his help in locating examples of art brut. In “Savage Values” Dubuffet specifically mentions his admiration for native American art, and his recent trip to “The Ethnographical Museum of Basle” where he saw “a group of decorated and painted wooden sculptures coming from the former German colony of New Mecklenburg, now called New Ireland.” He also speaks about his interest in forms of art which cannot be contained within the museum, namely Asiatic dance. His thoughts on this subject echo those expressed in two works he knew well—Antonin Artaud’s Theater and Its Double (1938), and Henri Michaux’s Barbarian In Asia (1943).

To a certain extent Dubuffet’s art brut collection can be thought of as a “museum without walls.” Significantly, André Malraux, the person to whom we owe the contemporaneous concept, was one of Dubuffet’s first supporters and a fervent enthusiast of art brut (he even reproduced a work by the art brut artist Guillaume Pujolle in Le Musée Imaginaire, 1947). As Malraux envisioned it, the museum without walls would, with photography’s help, assemble objects from all over the world, break down boundaries between nations and cultures, nullify time and space, and diminish issues relating to authorship. For Dubuffet, art brut also transcended national boundaries, and nationalisms. It is not for nothing that Dubuffet first searched for art brut in Switzerland, a culturally diverse, politically “neutral” country, and birthplace of that other truly international art movement, Dada. Moreover, Dubuffet refused to display the names and dates of art brut artists next to their works; in so doing he unwittingly answered Heinrich Wölfflin’s call for an art history without “proper names.” And, as was the case with Malraux’s musée imaginaire, photography played an important role in the collection, documentation, and publication of art brut. In an early call for help in finding examples of art brut, Dubuffet announced that he would gladly accept either “original works or photographs of these works,” as if the two were somehow interchangeable. Dubuffet’s collection of art brut was also “wall-less” in the sense that it was literally nomadic and non-site-specific. In 1951 he packed up the collection and sent it to Alfonso Ossorio’s estate in East Hampton, Long Island, New York, where it would stay for the next eleven years before returning to France in early 1962. Then in 1975 Dubuffet transferred the collection to The Château de Beaulieu in Lausanne, Switzerland, where it remains to this day.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that Jean Paulhan, Dubuffet’s close friend and mentor, also had a background in ethnography. Long before he accompanied Dubuffet on his first trip to Switzerland in search of art brut, or became a member of the


40. It might be helpful to think of art brut as a “homeless” or “exiled” art in terms similar to those used by T. J. Demos in his Ph.D. dissertation, “Duchamp Homeless? The Avant-Garde and Post-nationalism,” Columbia University, 2000. Claude Esteban has laid the groundwork for this kind of an approach in his article, “L’art dépossédé,” La Nouvelle Revue Française 174 (June 1967).


42. Paulhan published an account of this trip in the form of an falsely naïve ethnological travelogue, a voyage to a magical, exotic land in the heart of Europe. See Jean Paulhan, “Guide d’un petit voyage en Suisse au mois de juillet 1945,” Cahiers de la pléiade (April 1946).
Compagnie de l’Art Brut, Paulhan studied under Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and conducted ethnographic research on “the semantics of the proverb.” On the eve of World War II he was a participant, along with several members of the former Documents group, in the brief but important Collège de la Sociologie (1937–1939). (Lévi-Strauss attended, but did not participate in, the Collège’s meetings.)43 In 1939 Paulhan rereleased his 1913 study of Les hain-tenys, a transcription and translation of Malagasy proverbs. The revised version includes Paulhan’s self-reflective commentary in which he waives between ethnography proper and autobiographical reflection, and as such is reminiscent of Michel Leiris’s L’Africaine fantômes (1934).44 Both works occupy a middle ground between the twilight of ethnography and the birth of postcolonialism. Dubuffet, who had an insatiable appetite for Paulhan’s writings, was certainly aware of his early ethnographic studies. In fact, while traveling in Algeria, Dubuffet sent Paulhan examples of Arabian proverbs.45 Dubuffet and Paulhan were planning to travel to Madagascar together in the spring of 1947. Even though this trip was eventually canceled, Paulhan did visit Dubuffet in El Goléa in March of 1948.

Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss’s mutual respect for each other’s similar pursuits was apparently short-lived. We know that Lévi-Strauss, along with forty-eight others including Henri Michaux, André Malraux, Georges Henri Rivière, and Robert Dauchez, paid his dues and became an official subscribing member of the Compagnie de l’Art Brut in 1949.46 Later that year Lévi-Strauss attended the “L’Art Brut Préféré aux arts culturels” exhibition at the Galerie René Drouin (October 1949), which included 200 works by 63 different artists.47 Yet, after this date there is little if any evidence to suggest Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss stayed in touch. In a letter to Jacques Berne written in October 1970, Dubuffet would complain Lévi-Strauss had become too theoretical:

“There are too many cogitations on Theory . . . it is the malady of the epoch. . . . Into the fire with Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault.”48 However, anyone familiar with Dubuffet’s life-long love/hate relationship with French intellectuals will wisely take these comments with a grain of salt. Dubuffet tended to deride only those he deeply admired, and in retrospect it is clear he had more in common with these two great “cogitators of Theory,” than he cared to admit. Dubuffet’s incessant critique of madness, highlighted in the second half of “Savage Values,” undermined the age-old equation of primitivism, infantilism, and insanity, and in so doing paved the way for the French anti-psychiatric movement of the 1960s. Whereas Foucault chose to champion Artaud, Gilles Deleuze often referred specifically to Dubuffet, and even characterized his own philosophical project as a “sort of art brut.”49

While some writers have jocularly labeled Dubuffet an anthropologist or ethnologist,50 others, including Michel Thévoz, Gilbert Lascault, Leonard Emmerling, and Henri-Claude Cousseau have sought, in a more scholarly manner, to draw direct parallels between Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss.51 In very general terms, it is possible to talk about Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss’s similar...


46. Lucienne Peiry, Art Brut, p. 86.


emphasis on synchronics over diachronics, and their decidedly anti-Sartrean views of history (even though Dubuffet, in contrast to Lévi-Strauss, would never have articulated his position as such). Also, both Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss rely on the opposition of categories to structure their arguments—e.g., Dubuffet’s “art brut vs. cultural art” and Lévi-Strauss’s “nature vs. culture.” Interestingly enough, these opposing categories or terms were often gustative. Parts of Dubuffet’s “Savage Values,” such as his discussion of the presence and absence of vitamins in raw and cooked foods, sound as if they belong in Lévi-Strauss’s The Raw and the Cooked (1964).

And, in retrospect, it could be said that Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss share a common blind spot—even though their works are contemporary with and attuned to the demise of the empire, they never address the postcolonial context as such.52

More specific connections can be made between Dubuffet’s theorization of art brut and Lévi-Strauss’s The Savage Mind (1962). Before going into these, however, one point should be clarified. Savage Mind, the English translation of the original title of Lévi-Strauss’s La Pensée Sauvage, is somewhat misleading. Needless to say, the word “savage” is retrograde and carries a host of negative connotations. The title The Savage Mind gives the impression that Lévi-Strauss’s book is simply the latest version of Lévy-Brühl’s Primitive Mentality (La Mentalité primitive, 1922), and accordingly yet another attempt at demonstrating the inferiority of the “primitive” mind vis-à-vis the more advanced Western “scientific” mind. In reality nothing could be farther from the truth. Savage Thought or Untamed Thinking would have been a more accurate translation of Lévi-Strauss’s title. Savage thought, he advances, “is neither the thought of savages, nor that of primitive or archaic humanity, but thought in a wild state, distinct from cultivated or domesticated thought. . ..”53 Dubuffet’s definition of “sauvagerie” likewise revolved around a particular state of mind. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Dubuffet increasingly began to define art brut as a kind of mental operation or activity. In Lévi-Strauss’s terms, Dubuffet moved from art brut’s “technical plane” to its “intellectual plane.” For example, in a text dated August 1959 written as a preface for the exhibition “Art Brut” presented by Alphonse Chave at the Galerie les Images, Vence, Dubuffet describes art brut as a conceptual “pole” rather than a specific set of formal characteristics inherent to the works themselves.54

Lévi-Strauss resuscitates the French verb “bricolage”—which has no English equivalent but refers to the kind of activities performed by a resourceful “do-it-yourselfer”—to further explain his ideas about pensée sauvage. The “bricoleur,” in contrast to the engineer, uses whatever is “at hand,” preexisting “odds and ends,” or “leftovers.”55 Further, the scientific engineer differs from the bricoleur inasmuch as the former “is always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization,” while the latter “by inclination or necessity always remains within them.”56 Thus, there is an important temporal component inherent to Lévi-Strauss’s definition of the bricoleur which coincides with Dubuffet’s definition of the art brut artist—both figures are antithetical to diachronical models of history. Moreover, both employ mental operations which have remained the same throughout time, and create things which reside outside of time, or cannot be placed in time. It is not par hasard then that Lévi-Strauss resorts back to the pantheon of art brut to make his point—in the process of defining “bricolage” he specifically mentions The Postman Cheval, France’s most famous art brut artist.57

There is another facet of Lévi-Strauss’s savage mind that is closely related to Dubuffet’s theorization of art brut. The French title of Lévi-Strauss’s book contains an untranslatable pun. Homophonically, pensée sauvage also means Wild Pansy, the flower. This kind of word-play (along with his fondness for alliteration—e.g., Tristes Tropiques, Le Cru et le cuit) is typical of Lévi-Strauss and connects him to a history of avant-garde French literature—i.e., Stéphane Mallarmé, Max Jacob, Raymond Roussel—to which, I would argue, Dubuffet

52. Denis Hollier, “The Pure and the Impure,” in Literary Debate: Texts and Contexts, ed. Denis Hollier and Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: The New Press, 1999):14. Hollier makes this point about Lévi-Strauss, but I think it equally applies to Dubuffet. The only exceptions to this generalization might be a few letters Dubuffet wrote to Paulhan between April 6–April 16, 1948, in Dubuffet Paulhan Correspondence 1944-1968, pp. 502–508. But even then Dubuffet’s position is closer to André Gide’s in Voyage to the Congo (1925) than it is to say, Franz Fanon’s in Black Skin, White Masks (1952).


54. See Jean Dubuffet, “L’Art Brut,” a text from August 1959 written as a preface for the exhibition “Art Brut” presented by Alphonse Chave at the Galerie les Images, Vence, France, Prospectus I, pp. 513–516.


56. Ibid., 19.

57. The passage reads: “Like ‘bricolage’ on the technical plane, mythical reflection can reach brilliant unforeseen results on the intellectual plane. Conversely, attention has often been drawn to the mytho-poetical nature of ‘bricolage’ on the plane of so-called ‘brut’ or ‘naïve’ art, in the architectural follies like the Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval or the stage sets of Georges Méliés . . . .” (p. 17).
also belongs. Moreover, the title’s double entendre announces the linguistic dimension of Lévi-Strauss’s project. In offering evidence to disprove the common misconception that only “advanced” cultures are capable of abstract thought, Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that our modern scientific terminologies are no more accurate or nuanced than those used in so-called “primitive” societies. As someone who always maintained words are poor, inadequate translators of thought, Dubuffet would certainly agree with Lévi-Strauss here. In his homage to the experimental writer André Martel entitled, “A Grand Deferential Salute to the Martelandre,” Dubuffet uses the example of Esquisse to make a similar point. He suspects that the Eskimos, whose language is usually taken to be less complex than French, actually “have means richer than ours to communicate. More differentiating maybe, or more nuancible.”

Lévi-Strauss’s chief concern is declassification. In The Savage Mind he also asserts that our scientific categories are not as objective and immutable as one might expect. To the contrary, they are arbitrary, culturally constructed, and historically specific—in other words they are timely, not timeless. He concludes: “the truth of the matter is that the principle underlying a classification can never be postulated in advance.” Again, Dubuffet would concur wholeheartedly. “The role of the artist . . . and the poet,” he once explained to Jacques Berne, “is precisely to blur normal categories, to disrupt them, and by doing so restore to the eyes and the mind ingenuity and freshness.” In a manner reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of Totemic classifications in chapter 2 of The Savage Mind, Dubuffet further elaborates:

[Categories] . . . vegetable, fruit, citrus fruit, orange, are very arbitrary. . . . Everybody gets used to them by force of habit, but we could have become very accustomed to other categories. For example, when one says that a swallow stabs the sky. Well yes, instead of grouping a swallow with a stork in order to establish a bird category one could have done otherwise, and classify a swallow with a dagger (in the category for sharp objects and perforators) and a stork with an electric desk lamp (the category for things with feet with long legs).

In a long essay dedicated to one of his favorite art brut artists, Dubuffet specifically praises “Gaston le Zoologue,” [Gaston the Zoologist] for accomplishing this kind of declassification through his work.

However, if we follow this line of thinking further we arrive at an insurmountable chasm between Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss, which no doubt explains why the two thinkers eventually parted ways. In the end, their ideas about art are incompatible. For Lévi-Strauss, ethnology as a whole, and the study of art in particular, deals with “the problem of communication.” As a scientist he breaks down preconceived categories for the sole purpose of reconstructing new ones, which are meant to help us interpret the art and myths of other cultures. Lévi-Strauss believes that the practice of structural anthropology will enable him, as the pun in the title of La voie des masques (1975) implicitly suggests, to give “voice” to works of art which would otherwise remain silent. In the preface to this study of Northwest Coast Indian masks he posits:

. . . As in the case with myths, masks, too, cannot be interpreted in and by themselves as separate objects. Looked upon from the semantic point of view, a myth acquires sense only after it is returned to its transformation set. Similarly, one type of mask, considered only from the plastic point of view, echoes other types whose lines and colors it transforms while it assumes its own individuality. For this individuality to stand out against another mask it is necessary that the same relationship exist between the message that the first mask has to transmit or connote and the message that the other mask must convey within the same culture or in a neighboring culture.

Dubuffet, on the other hand, is uninterested in reconstructing the categories he destroys. Art brut, Modernism’s last Other, is precisely that which falls outside of any “transformation set” or “matrix of intelligibility.” It is always singular and isolated, inaccessible and impenetrable. As far as Dubuffet is concerned, each art brut artist is a “closed-circuit,” in dialog with him- or herself alone. The essence of the work of art brut lies in its illegibility, its incommunicability, and its indecipherability. Dubuffet’s art brut is, ultimately, Lévi-Strauss’s “mana”: a sign signifying nothing, a symbol with zero symbolic value.

60. Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, p. 58.
65. Prospectus I, p. 322.
66. Lévi-Strauss, Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss, p. 64.