



# Critical faculties

Our roving columnist **Donald Hutera** is mad about a Swiss museum of 'outsider' art. But what has this got to do with dance?

**Forget, if you can, about dance for just a few minutes.** I want to tell you about an extraordinary Swiss museum. Founded in 1976 by the French artist Jean Dubuffet, the Collection de l'Art Brut is housed in an unassuming building behind a row of hedges near the centre of Lausanne. The timbered interior, however, is packed from ground floor to attic with the some of the most original, epic yet meticulous and cumulatively subversive paintings, drawings, sculpture and writings I've encountered.

'Art does not come and lie down in the beds that have been made for it,' Dubuffet once wrote. 'It runs away as soon as anyone utters its name; what it likes is being incognito. Its best moments are when it forgets what it is called.' Out of this ethos the museum was born. According to promotional material, it presents works by self-taught creators who, for various reasons, 'have eluded cultural conditioning and social conformity. Those who produce Art Brut are 'marginalised people endowed with a rebellious spirit or immune to collective norms and values.' They include 'prisoners, inmates of psychiatric hospitals, eccentrics, loners and outcasts. They work in solitude, secrecy and silence, paying no heed to public criticism or the gaze of others. Unscathed by influences deriving from artistic traditions, the works feature singular modes of representation. Availing themselves of totally novel materials and means, their creators develop techniques of their very own.'

This was certainly true of the temporary exhibition I caught in Lausanne in October. It spotlighted nearly one hundred works by twelve recently discovered Japanese artists, most diagnosed with a mental illness. Asia is, apparently, one of the new hotbeds of the so-called outsider art that the museum seeks to celebrate. Make of this what you will, but the Japanese dozen were all males. Described as 'sole masters of unique worlds,' they were said to have been 'creating on the fringes of a society marked by hyper-performance and competitiveness.' Both strange and beautiful, their work ranged from a thick, cord-bound graphic diary composed of countless sheets filled with misshapen syllabic figures, to creepily attractive ceramics covered with crustacean-like protuberances, to free-wheeling yet incredibly detailed imaginary townscapes drawn (without recourse to preliminary outlines) while their maker is installed at a favourite window.

So much for art and commerce, or fame. It's edifying how those with a compulsion to create, and who may have little or no access to conventional resources, can still make the best of what is to hand. I'm thinking of the young man,

obsessed with Japanese Kanji characters, who inscribes tiny ideograms on paper used to record air traffic control data that his father brings home for him. Or the lanky fellow who draws totemic couples on cardboard boxes salvaged from the kitchen of the psychiatric hospital where he resides. There's also an indigent but up-beat septuagenarian who, in the spirit of 'international friendship,' bicycles through town in colourful kimono-style wraps, headdresses festooned with small toys and dolls and portable shrines (one featured a live goldfish) strapped to his chest and back. It all began the day he went out on the streets wearing, for no apparent reason, an empty, plastic instant noodle bowl on his head. The effect of the public's reaction was, he has claimed, exalting.

Comprised of more than 35,000 pieces, the museum's permanent collection is equally fascinating and, despite the poignance of some of the biographies supplied for each artist, as uplifting as it is overwhelming. I'm thinking now of a never-worn wedding dress sewn, with painstaking delicacy, from old sheets by a lovelorn French lady; the gorgeously gaudy faux aquariums of an Algerian man who ate shellfish in order to have working material; or the American woman with Down's Syndrome who concealed objects - from magazines to brollies - inside huge balls of yarn, string and fibres. A room devoted to the watercoloured scrolls of the prolific, reclusive and devout Chicago-born fantasist Henry Darger (whose fans include Turner Prize-winner Grayson Perry) also made a big impression.

What has any of this got to do with dance? Nothing, directly, and yet maybe more than a bit of everything. Training in any art form is valuable and valid, and remuneration for professional pursuits a necessity. But there are areas of creativity that transcend practicalities and craft, as the museum in Lausanne proves. There is, I suspect, an empathic identification we in the dance industry might have with the multifarious work gathered under the heading of l'art brut. With apologies to the likes of Nijinsky or Van Gogh, it isn't about needing to suffer to make art that matters. It has more to do with rawness, authenticity and purity of intention, inclusivity and the healthy, innately human need for self-expression, and the motivating blur between passion and obsession. Where, I would ask, does your work weigh in on the scale of Apollonian order and Dionysian abandon? Ask yourselves to what 'crazy,' possibly wonderful or at the very least liberating places it's taken you.

Donald Hutera writes regularly for The Times, Time Out, Dance Europe, Dance Now, Animated and many other publications.

**Above:** Donald Hutera. Photo: Rob Greig/Timeout

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