Art Brut in America

The Institution of Ivan Catheatre
Few of Jean Dubuffet’s personal and professional relationships survived the ups and downs of the artist’s notoriously demanding and colerique temperament. His friendship with Alfonso Ossorio, which lasted from their introduction in November 1949 until late in their lives, however, represents a rare exception to the rule.

At the end of the 1940s, while continuing to produce his own paintings, Ossorio became increasingly interested in collecting the work of his contemporaries or, as he put it, in “buying ideas.” Ossorio purchased Jackson Pollock’s Number 5, 1948 from the Betty Parsons Gallery in January 1949. By spring, Ossorio and Pollock had become fast friends. When they got together, they often spoke of another artist whom they both admired: Dubuffet. At Pollock’s urging, Ossorio went to Paris in the fall of 1949 to meet Dubuffet and see more of his work. The relationship was arranged by Ossorio’s friend, the French author and translator Blaise Adam, who happened to know Dubuffet’s close acquaintance and first champion, the linguist and chief editor of La nouvelle revue française, Jean Paulhan.

In Paris, Ossorio and Dubuffet immediately hit it off and saw each other regularly. Dubuffet showed Ossorio how to install his own works as well as examples from his collection of art brut. Ossorio purchased three of Dubuffet’s paintings: Robinson (1949), Figure au site champêtre (1949), and La dame au pompon (1946). Before Ossorio returned to New York, Dubuffet gave him a copy of his first book, Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre (Prospectus for Amateur Artists of Every Kind) (1946), and the catalog he had prepared for a recent exhibition of art brut at the Galerie Rene Drouin, Art Brut in Preference to the Cultural Arts (1949). The first book, which Ossorio would cite as one of the most important books he ever read, takes the form of a user’s manual for “amateur artists of every kind.”4 Forgoing traditional methods and linear narrative, it highlights the materialistic and operational side of painting, and as such seems to anticipate much of what Dubuffet would write on Ossorio in 1951.

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At the same time that he was painting the mural for the church, Ossorio also made a series of approximately four hundred drawings, gouaches, and watercolors. The mural project, which required Ossorio to stay within the confines of traditional Christian iconography, felt constraining to him. The smaller works became his release. They were spontaneous and improvisational, done on sheets from a pad of Tiffany & Co. paper that his brother had given him, simply because it was there at hand. Ossorio allowed himself to try something new—a wax resist technique, which he readily admitted he borrowed from Romanian surrealist Victor Brauner. These works became known as the Victorias drawings (even though they are technically paintings) and comprise many of the pieces that Dubuffet focuses on in his 1951 monograph on Ossorio, Peintures initiatiques d'Alfonso Ossorio. (The Initiatory Paintings of Alfonso Ossorio) (page 41). Dubuffet rightly refers to them as Ossorio's 'overflow'-decoration for his own personal and private Church.10 Ossorio sent Dubuffet photographs of the Victorias drawings and the actual examples of the smaller works in the monastery, and soon Dubuffet expressed an interest in writing a book on Ossorio and organizing a show of his work in Paris. Both projects eventually came to fruition. Dubuffet also sent a book of photographs of some American art brut objects that Ossorio owned, including the anonymous Crucifix and Christ Child. Ossorio had been collecting these objects long before he learned of Dubuffet's parallel research. In a letter dated May 22, 1950, Dubuffet replied: "Many thanks for the beautiful photographs of American art brut objects. I am delighted to paste the reproduction into the album of the Foyer de l'Art Brut."

At first, Ossorio's art went hand-in-hand with the idea of an art brut. Moreover, Ossorio clearly fit Dubuffet's notion of the art brut artist as he defined it in 1949: someone 'who works from his own reserves' and refuses to 'mimic' others. Equally important, Dubuffet felt that Ossorio's works were, like those by all artists bruts, "grandly remote from the aims of classical European art,? and "founded on a non-classical, non-literary practice."

Over time, however, Dubuffet's opinions inevitably evolved, and he came to admit that Ossorio was far too cultured and literary to be considered a true art brut artist. And yet, to Dubuffet's mind, Ossorio nevertheless possessed something so unique that he merited a full-fledged monographic study. Dubuffet would continue to insist on this, unequivocally, as highly cultural and anti-institutional, but putting aside ideological and historical influences, his position was never fully resolved, and it is reflected today in Ossorio's status in the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland. Eleven of Ossorio's works are included in the collection, but they reside in permanent limbo—that is, in the museum's "new invention" department of the museum, which is dedicated to artists who have brut qualities but are not entirely "exempt from cultural implications."
Dubuffet reminisced about his time with Ossorio in 1950 and 1951, when he was working on his first major exhibition in Paris. The artist described how Ossorio had invited him to his home in the French island of Iles d'Hyeres, off the Cote d'Azur, where he had been living since 1947. Ossorio was an Italian painter who had moved to the island in 1943, and he had invited Dubuffet to stay with him in his tiny house on the island's north coast. Dubuffet was a workaholic even while on vacation, and he spent most of his time painting and experimenting with new techniques and materials.

Dubuffet's work during this period was characterized by a mixture of abstraction and figurative realism. He was interested in the paradoxical qualities of the female nude, as he observed in a note: "It is at the same time a symbol of purity and the symbol of desire. The female body, symbolic of conception, is also the symbol of destruction."

One of the most notable works from this period is "La mere en rose" (1950), a painting that he completed in the summer of 1949. The painting was exhibited in Ossorio's exhibition "Peintures initiatiques d'Alfonso Ossorio" at the Galerie de l'Union in Paris (January 9-February 3, 1950), and it was favorably reviewed by American critic Henry McBride in the New York Times. McBride described the painting as "a masterpiece of Dubuffet's." He praised the "fascinating" image of a woman in rose-colored clothing, which he described as "a symbol of purity and the symbol of destruction." McBride also noted the "dazzling" colors and "the strong, clear lines" that make up the painting.

Dubuffet's interest in the female nude as a symbol of purity and destruction was not just a personal interest, but also a reflection of the broader cultural climate of the post-war period. The artist was part of a group of European painters known as the "Nouveau Realisme," who were interested in exploring the paradoxical qualities of the human body and the human condition. This group included artists such as Niki de Saint Phalle, Yves Klein, and Alberto Burri, among others.

In conclusion, Dubuffet's time with Ossorio in 1950 and 1951 was a formative period for the artist. The experience of living and working on the French island of Iles d'Hyeres, off the Cote d'Azur, provided him with a unique opportunity to explore new techniques and materials, and to reflect on the paradoxical qualities of the female nude as a symbol of purity and destruction. The resulting works, such as "La mere en rose," are considered to be among Dubuffet's most important and influential pieces of art.
There is ample evidence to suggest that thinking and writing about Ossorio's paintings inspired Dubuffet's own art practice in the years to come. As B. H. Friedman rightly points out, in Dubuffet's text on Ossorio he writes about the butterfly-like compositions apparent in several of the Victorias drawings; shortly thereafter he begins to work on his butterfly collages. We also learn a great deal about the way Ossorio successfully mixes the vegetable, animal, and mineral kingdoms and concentrates on natural processes, which take place regardless of the artist's intention. This essentially anti-humanist stance—at the core of which is the idea that things happen in nature independent of man's intervention—will resurface in Dubuffet's Materiologies paintings and Phenomenes prints from the late 1950s.

And at other times, Dubuffet's descriptions of Ossorio's paintings seem to anticipate the development of the former's Phenomenes, which would commence one decade later and last for twelve years (the longest in his career), especially when he talks about how in Ossorio's works, "the fields of the picture surrounding the figures appear and consist of very complex elements—like those constituting the figures themselves, composed like them." The same effect is also apparent in Ossorio's very Hourloupe-like exhibition poster from 1951, which Dubuffet would have known well. Interestingly enough, it is Ossorio who in turn would write one of the best articles we have on Dubuffet's Phenomenes series.

Writing on Ossorio's Victorias works not only inspired Dubuffet's future art practice, but enabled him to further develop his attempts to develop a new genre of art historical writing, one that is composed in the perpetual present tense, is presented as lived experience, and favors opacity over transparency, surface over depth, and polysemy over univocal iconological decipherment. The book allowed Dubuffet to put into practice what we might call, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "primacy of perception," a phenomenologically based "primacy of description." Dubuffet's prose is an act of writing in an inchoate state, continually coming into being, a form on par with the works of art he attempts to describe. In his 1946 Prospectus, Dubuffet argues that a painting should not be viewed passively, absorbed as a whole by an instantaneous glance by its viewer, but rather relived in the same way that it was worked out, remade by the mind and reenacted. Five years later, in Peintures initiatiques d'Alfonso Ossorio, Dubuffet successfully merges studio practice with art writing, reminding us that, just as viewing a work of art should always be an act of re-creation experienced in the present tense, the act of writing about a work of art should be a literary reenactment and re-performance of it.

The following excerpts from the book help to illustrate this:

At first glance [Ossorio's paintings] look like a multicolored chaos, a storm of violently applied dots, sores, and ulcerous lesions, in which rather shapeless figures can sometimes be made out (not always right away) ... all seething with varicosities, leprosies, and abscesses. A fracas of forms, sometimes vaguely anatomical, sometimes taking on the aspects of vegetables, hiding, or from some arbitrary domain of fancy—mindless, wild—vistas—among which appear still other tiny grinning faces or grotesque little personages.

Likewise, about Ossorio's compositional choices and specifically his abrogation of form and contour, Dubuffet writes:

The compositional structure of these images aggressively flouts humanist tastes and classical preconceptions. The world they create has multiple centers of expansion or no centers whatsoever. All sorts of rhythms, apposite or unexpected, emerge, dissolving, developing, reengendering... They twine and overlap each other... From their conflicts are born certain systems whose bizarre structures are quite disconcerting. We are reminded, in certain cases, of compositions in the form of an explosion...eddying waters, wild hair, melting lava.... We are overwhelmed because, in the end, Ossorio paints whatever moves, heaves, surges, and he loves to punctuate this vehemence with whip-like signs, sudden falls, lightning flashes, flights of birds... In other words, he does not want to lose too far from the chancellors, the formulas... 

Throughout his text, Dubuffet sprinkles in culinary phrases—for example, "Ossorio creates an indistinct broth into which we can dip our spoon at any point"—as if to remind us that the works of art must be apprehended somatically, devoured while they are hot. This kind of writing—on-the-spot, materialistic, and performative—which Dubuffet fully develops in his text on Ossorio, is similar to that which appears in recipe-like "how-to" texts in Dubuffet's studio notebooks, which he kept throughout his entire career. Furthermore, Dubuffet frequently employed this kind of writing when discussing the works of his favorite artists. Indeed, in Dubuffet's proposed book Almanach de J'Art Brut (The Art Brut Almanac), which he began to write in 1948 after Gallimard pulled the plug on the agreed upon series of art brut publications, he planned to include a number of similar how-to entries on "Peinturez hardi" (Paint hardily), for each month of the year (for example, "White pigments," "Watercolours," "Gouache," "Emulsions," and "Mastic"). Unfortunately, this almanac never saw the light of day. Ultimately, however, Dubuffet admits that Ossorio's paintings defy language and the very book that he attempts to write. He concludes, "The high intensity of the forms generated here, the vehement impulsion by which all the graphs are animated, translates the movement of the artist's thoughts better than any more explicit formulation might. Thus the attitudes of an inspired dancer convey a certain position of the mind, a more evident fashion perhaps, and in any case a more lasting one, than any clearly written treatise." Dubuffet knows that he does not have the last word on Ossorio; no one does. His art is an open book.

Ossorio's exhibition at Studio Paul Facchetti in Paris, in which he first displayed his Victoria works, and for which Dubuffet's book served as a catalog, ran from October 9 to 30, 1951. Near the end of it, Ossorio left with Dubuffet for New York City. After a six-day journey on the Le-de-France, the two artists reached New York on October 23. According to his autobiography, Biographie au pas de course (Biography at the Last Minute), written months before he passed away in 1984, Dubuffet met Pollock at Ossorio's apartment the first night he arrived in New York. A former wine salesman who drank rarely if at all, Dubuffet...
reason Ossorio remains so important. It is not he made those pieces, all the contemporary art was not. It was timeless not timel. His lanana, e, market-driven, international. Individual, not part of a universal art-world. Yes, IS artistic language was personal and

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October 1953, It seems that he wasn't interested in playing the game of New York versus Paris. When, in October 1953, Dubuffet often stated that he did not keep up with contemporary art. Likewise Hampton estate, Ossorio remained behind the scenes, The works of art brut came first. tastes, as well as his modesty. When Hans Namuth showed up to take pictures of his East

The unique non-hierarchical manner in which Ossorio displayed them at the Creeks not only He literally lived with them for close to a decade, and he treated them as if they were his own. The objects in Dubuffet’s Collection de l’Art Brut had become part of Ossorio’s life. He literally lived with them for close to a decade, and he treated them as if they were his own. The unique non-hierarchical manner in which Ossorio displayed them at the Creeks not only reflects a desire to retain the atmosphere of the way they were first shown in the basement of the Howard Wise Gallery in Paris, but also speaks to Ossorio’s openness and heterogeneous tastes, as well as his modesty. When Hans Namuth showed up to take pictures of his East Hampton estate, Ossorio remained behind the scenes. The works of art brut came first. The motor behind the whole reassessment of Ossorio’s work really goes back to that period of the fifties. So he knew exactly what he was doing in that last year, particularly in the couple of hundred weeks on paper that he had done in the Philippines in 1950. They are done with a wax resist technique. You can apply wax to paper, either when it is a hot liquid, when it’s melted, or when it’s cold, nothing if he is a crayon. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. Wax resist is wax-coated paper. Wax will resist water-based paint. 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