

HANNAH RIEGER, VIENNA - MEET THE COLLECTOR SERIES PART ONE

series · August 1, 2019

Following on from last years series asking artists that I support what it means to be an artist, I thought I would do another series, but this time focusing on collectors of outsider art/art brut/whatever they want to call it, which I have titled the MEET THE COLLECTOR series! I wanted to know how they became interested in this field, what makes them tick and how they acquire the works in their collections - and I am hoping you are all just as interested as me! So the first person I contacted was **Hannah Rieger** who resides in Vienna, Austria. Hannah sprang to mind as she was the co-curator of the recent 'Flying High' exhibition in Vienna, focusing on women artists of art brut. Below you will find our interview.



Hannah Rieger, copyright Helmut Voith

1. When did your interest in the field of outsider art begin?

My interest in the field of Art Brut - I prefer this term - began in 1980. I went to an exhibition of Johann Hauser and Oswald Tschirtner, two of the best-known **Gugging** artists, in a museum in Vienna. I was overwhelmed by Johann Hauser's colourful depictions of women and I found myself fascinated by the contrast of Oswald Tschirtner's small black ink drawings. Because this exhibition was in a museum, it did not occur to me that it would be possible to buy any of these works.

In 1984, I visited another exhibition which really influenced me to focus on Art Brut. That was "Primitivism in 20th Century Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. There was a section dedicated to Dada and Surrealism. Many surrealists were influenced by primitivism and by art from psychiatric institutions.

2. When did you become a collector of this art?

These exhibitions in Vienna and New York inspired my interest in Art Brut. But it was another seven years before I purchased my first Gugging works from a gallery in Vienna in 1991. Since then I have been buying Art Brut. Artworks from Gugging still form the core - about half - of my collection.

3. What is it that draws your eye away from contemporary art to outsider art? Or do you collect both?

No, I am a specialised Art Brut collector. Art Brut touches my soul.

4. What style of work, if any, is of particular interest to you within this field?

No, it is not a style of work.

A few years ago, I started to focus on female Art Brut artists.

For many years my Art Brut collection almost exclusively featured male artists from Gugging. Men were over-represented. After all, the world famous Austrian Art Brut model had begun as a men's section in a psychiatric clinic at Maria Gugging, just outside Vienna. Laila Bachtiar remains to this day one of the few exceptions.

It was my mother, a committed feminist, who particularly insisted that I should also include female artists in my collection. So I added international artists such as Aloïse Corbaz, Madge Gill, Martha Grunenwaldt, Guo Fengyi, Mary T. Smith and Anna Zemánková.

At some point I realised that there are only a few independent female collectors of Art Brut in Europe. There are even fewer women who collect works by female artists.



Install shot of 'Flying High'. Photograph by Jennifer Gilbert

5. Would you say you had a favourite artist or piece of work within your collection? And why?

No.

6. Is there an exhibition in this field of art that you have felt has been particularly important? And why?

Yes, for me the exhibition 'Il Palazzo Enciclopedico' (**the Encyclopedic Palace**) curated by Massimiliano Gioni at the Venice Biennale in 2013 was particularly important. It did not only integrate Outsider Art, but made it its focus. I think, this exhibition was a turning point in the field.

7. Where would you say you buy most of your work from: a studio, art fairs, exhibitions, or direct from artists?

I bought most of my works in galleries, some in art fairs like the Art Chicago or the Outsider Art Fair in Paris or New York, a few in studios and very few direct from artists. Two years ago I traveled to Narwana Jind in Haryana in India to visit **Pradeep Kumar** and his family. There I bought 20 miniature sculptures carved out of matchsticks and toothpicks.

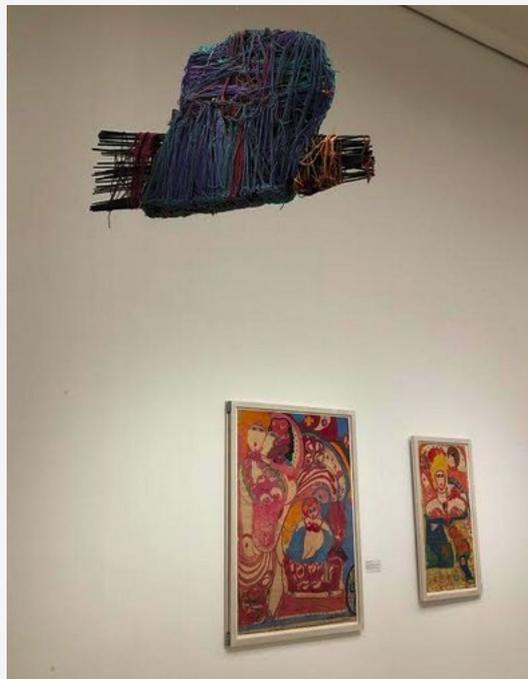
8. You recently co-curated 'Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut' in Vienna, which was an incredible show, showcasing a vast array of work and styles! Can you tell me where the ideas for this show came from? And why this venue was chosen?

'Flying High' was worldwide unique regarding quality, variety and number of works. It was the first exhibition that was devoted "globally" to female positions in Art Brut produced from 1860 until the present. The exhibition united 316 works by 93 women artists, from 21 countries and 31 collections. Every story of female Art Brut artists is of course closely related to the history of women's emancipation in general. But discrimination often manifests itself even more dramatically in the field of Art Brut. These female artists are often "outsiders within the outsiders", since Art Brut still has to fight for its equal status alongside the academically recognised "high art".

Since women first have to conquer their place both within Art Brut and also beyond feminist art, it was high time for a presentation of their works. This was the task that 'Flying High' in the Kunstforum Wien had set itself. Personally I was very excited that a longterm dream of mine has come true: to exhibit international female Art Brut artists in the centre of Europe, in the heart of Vienna.

I was specially thankful to Ingrid Brugger, the Director of the Kunstforum Wien, who invited me to co-curate with her our exhibition 'Flying High'. This was a wonderful recognition of my expertise as a specialized Art Brut collector for three decades.

Our main interest was in the way female Art Brut artists express their regained identities – through art as an action and in the art as symbolisation. Women Art Brut artists often had to fight hard for their identities. They reflect their inner worlds, their "individual mythologies" – as the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann named them – and their personal life stories. Often influenced by mental illness, isolation, sexual abuse, exclusion and other difficulties, female artists choose different subjects and motifs compared to male artists. Their methods of production, materials, techniques and media are different.



Install shot of 'Flying High'. Photograph by Jennifer Gilbert

9. You have also recently released a book 'Living in Art Brut' – What made you decide to release a book (and accompanying website) at this point in your life?

Every exhibition is an expression of my deep and longstanding respect for Art Brut, which has been part of my life for decades. The Artistic Director of the think tank and NGO Globart, Heidemarie Dobner, invited me to show around 100 works from my collection in a museum in Krems, Austria, in 2017. The exhibition was curated by Monika Jagfeld, Director of the **Museum im Lagerhaus**, Stiftung für schweizerische Naive Kunst und Art Brut in St. Gallen, Switzerland (Foundation for Swiss Naive Art and Art Brut). The book you mention is the Globart book catalogue 'Living in Art Brut. 123 Works from the Hannah Rieger Collection'. From this book it was a small step to bring a website into the world. Living in Art Brut has become the branding of my collection. Living in Art Brut means that I orient my own life and work increasingly around this world of art. It means that I allow it to influence my whole identity.

10. As you have a large collection now, what sort of pieces are you looking to continue to add to your collection?

There are some Japanese Art Brut artists, who really interest me: Keisuke Ishino from the Kagoshima Prefecture (I love objects) and Takuya Tamura from Yamanami Kōbō, and Kōka (unfortunately he uses felt-tipped pen).

11. Do you have any plans to show your collection in the future?

There will be one small exhibition in Klagenfurt in Austria next year. And there is another project for an exhibition in Lower Austria in 2021. I am also in discussion with Marina Chrystoph, the Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum in Paris. She initiated the exhibition **'Les Femmes dans l' art brut?'** in 2018/2019 in the Art et Marges musée, Brussels, which showed 105 works from my collection.

12. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Although Art Brut is often in the spotlight of the international art world, it still does not receive the recognition that I believe it deserves. To work on this is my aim as a collector and an 'Art Brut-activist'.

