

"The women" in my collection

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Every exhibition like this is an expression of my profound respect for Art Brut, which has been part of my life for decades. So above all I would like to thank the 22 female and 19 male artists whose work is brought together here, and particularly Laila Bachtiar, who is with us this evening.

At the core of our exhibition on the occasion of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union is a question mark. Les Femmes dans l'Art Brut? Point d'interrogation.

This question mark allows a broad interpretation: female Art Brut artists – in this sense it is a topic of emancipation, in the spirit of our time – but it also includes portrayals of women by male Art Brut artists.

What is the story of female artists in my collection? Just imagine: My working environments have always been male. And for many years my Art Brut collection almost exclusively featured male artists from Gugging, such as Oswald Tschirtner or Johann Hauser. Men were always 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 artists such as Aloïse Corbaz, Madge Gill, Martha Grunenwaldt, Guo Fengyi, Mary T. Smith and Anna Zemánková.

At some point I realized 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.

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".

My main interest is 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.

For me, collecting has become an extensive project. Now this extraordinary art shapes my whole identity and life: Living in Art Brut. Vivre dans l'art brut.

It also means travelling, exhibitions, publications, networking and communication – far beyond the collecting itself.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me close here in Brussels with some special thanks: to **Isabella Lindner**, who initiated this exhibition, to **Tatiana Veress** and **Coline De Reymaeker**, the two curators, and the fantastic team from art et marges, to **Caroline Lamarche** for her wonderful contribution to our online catalogue, to **Marina Chrystoph** and the team from the Austrian Cultural Forum, especially **Julia Bucz**, for implementing it, and to **Heidi Meissnitzer** for her support. Thank you.

Hannah Rieger
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