

Art for the artist's sake

Gaia Gentilotti

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Introduction

[...] [C]reation is a vital necessity. It can be ritual, magic, prophylactic or therapeutic in nature and as such renders the border between art and life extremely tenuous [...] there is no difference between life and creation.

Sara Lombardi in *Documenta: Art Brut: an evolving notion from 1945 until today*. 2022. Prod. by Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt. Min 12.12.

What is the value? There is no value.

Adam Lindemann in *Be right back*. 2016. Dir. by Axelrod. Min 28.14.

Throughout the history of arts and their studies many are the recorded attempts to define what art is, and soon after one definition seemed to have established itself a new form of art came to prove it wanting. It is curious in the first place to want to give a definition of such a peculiar matter, and it seems naturally difficult to find a clear and universal answer, but this did not stop art historians, philosophers, writers and many more to attempt to find definitions, often with no spread success.

The only field where a clearer definition of art seems to have been reached is the art market, where art is being used as a financial investment. The hegemony of the art market, while using art to generate money, has deeply influenced the perception of what good and bad art is and it forced an overall definition of it. When analysing the writings of Leo Tolstoy, and applying his views on art to the art market definition of it, this definition is proven to be wrong. While some cases of financial success in art, such as the Cattelan case, are a good example of the functioning of the laws of the art market. However, other cases, like the one of L'Art Brut, also known as Outsider Art, show how art can be recognised as such even after depriving it of its monetary value, supporting at the same time Tolstoy theories.

Art appears to be subject to an infinite number of variables, such as its monetary value and context of display, that influence its truthfulness and

success. It is impossible to define what art is, let alone what good or bad art is, but it is possible to look into what art is for its producer, the artist. The artist is intended as any person creating a product, that functions as a media of expression, and that the person declares to be art. Art products, be it a play, music, a painting or a performance, are serving the artist's need of expression, and no one else's. Therefore, the duty to define the nature of their own art is given to the artist, and the one to decide what good and bad art is, is left to everyone else.

After talking of the matters mentioned above, and having analysed the case of Maurizio Cattelan and the one of Art Brut, in this paper the author will explain the process that brings them to producing an art piece. Sharing the artistic process, next to a few words on art practice, is necessary to clarify and give reasons to the author's view on what art is, and where its value lies. Moreover, the display of the artistic process will show how one concept can be declined in numerous different ways in art, and no one style and form can be enough to serve expression.

1. What is art?

On the nature of art people have not had enough doubts, writes Tolstoy (1897 [1904]: ch. II). When talking about art, continues the author, most people would never stop questioning the meaning itself of the used word, as often happens to cloudy conceptions expressed by a word (Tolstoy 1897 [1904]: ch. II). As art has been mistaken for beauty by many, it could seem that art's aim is to transmit beauty, but this answer is not sufficient according to Tolstoy (1897 [1904]: ch. II). The author goes on summarising beauty definitions by other authors before him, and demonstrates how all attempts to define beauty have failed. He reckons that all attempts to define absolute beauty either define nothing at all, or defines only a small part of what everybody considers to be the body of arts (Tolstoy 1897 [1904]: ch. III-IV).

Art, deprived of the possibility of being described as a mean of sharing beauty, needs a new definition. This definition is found in art's capability of being infectious, in facts this trait is precisely what defines it as such. Tolstoy defines the infectiousness as the ability of an object, sound, or even a happening to unite people spiritually, to make them feel what the author feels, to infect the viewer with these feelings (1897 [1904]: ch. XV). In facts, according to Tolstoy (1897 [1904]: ch. XI), "Universal art arises only when some one of the people, having experienced a strong emotion, feels the necessity of transmitting it to others."

However, according to the author (Tolstoy 1897 [1904]: ch. IV), most of the art that gets consumed by the public is not art at all, but its counterfeit, accepted as being art by the upper-class of society. Tolstoy explains how counterfeit art is drawing attention because of its ability to fit in the art canon of a time, which is decided by a reduced group of people belonging to the same class, on the basis of arbitrary characteristics (1897 [1904]: ch. IV). But the acceptance of counterfeit art as such does not ensure it a place in the group of Universal art works, continues Tolstoy (1897 [1904]: ch. XI) from the quotation

before, "The art of the rich classes, on the other hand, arises not from the artist's inner impulse, but chiefly because people of the upper classes demand amusement and pay well for it."

1.1 The Cattelan case

Maurizio Cattelan is an example of success within the art market, and can be analysed in connection to the views that Tolstoy wrote about. To do so it is better to start from the definition of art given by the members and workers of the art market. The art market's current definition of good art, as explained by the economist and art wealth advisor Alessia Zorloni (2011 [2016]: 75-76), is based on the ability of the artist to show entrepreneurial attitudes and to produce an original artistic project, which is composed of pieces of recognisable style and content. The requirement that is most asked to art is to produce "senseful processes" that the artist must justify in front of the whole history of art (Zorloni 2011 [2016]: 75,76). The stars of the art market are characterised by the ability to keep their brand visible in all their works, producing a credible collection of art. Cattelan is an example of the combination of these characteristics, a proof that art does not need to be beautiful, and at the same time a possible incarnation of counterfeit art for the rich classes.

However, what makes Maurizio Cattelan interesting is his awareness on his position as artist. As Adam Lindemann (Be right back 2016: 28.49), art collector and art dealer, said, Maurizio with his art pieces creates riddles, and if you understand these riddles, you are part of the few, if you don't you are out of the inner circle. Linemann (Axelrod 2016: 29.00) goes on saying that Maurizio uses the vanity of his buyers, their desire to be "in", to pull money out of their pockets to pay for things that are essentially junk.

At the start of his career, Maurizio enjoyed playing with the concept of absent artworks. For his first solo exhibition in 1989 he locked the gallery door, and hanged a "be right back" sign on

it, as one understands from the documentary *Be right back* (2016: 7.24). In another occasion he reported to the local police the theft of an invisible work he said to have produced (fig...), to then hang the theft report instead of the work, which, in facts, was non-existing. He even stole artworks from another gallery to show them in his own exhibition, with the name of *Another Fucking Readymade* in 1996. This last work clearly refers to Dada art, especially to *Marchel Duchamp*. *Rovati* explains (2015: 16) that the members of Dada meant their movement to mean everything and nothing. Exactly like the Dadaists, *Maurizio* knows the meaning and value of his art, which can be everything and nothing.

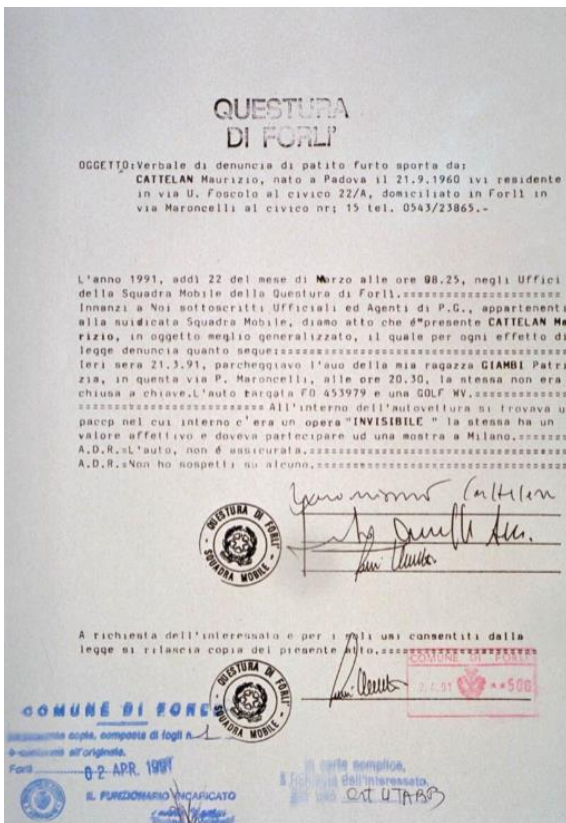


Figure 1 *Another Fucking Readymade*, Cattelan, 1991.

Cattelan barely ever produced his own artworks, he also mostly appears in public using his doppelganger *Massimiliano Gioni*. He says to not want recognition for his artworks because of the risk of shrinking his possibilities and options, as *Gioni* said during an interview in *Be right back* (2016: 42.09). *Maurizio* seems to play exactly with the critique that *Tolstoy* raised on upper class art: he produces art works that are such only because a class decides so, and sells them

for incredibly high prices, such as the work *Him*, sold at *Christie's* for 17,189,000 US\$ in 2016 (*Christie's* n.d.)

1.2 The Art Brut case

Sara Lombardi (*Documenta: Art Brut: an evolving notion from 1945 until today* 2022: 5.29). explains how *Jean Dubuffet* who was a French painter and sculptor, travelled to Switzerland in 1945 with his friend *Jean Paul*, writer, and the architect *Le Corbusier*, in search of a new form of art. He visited psychiatric hospitals, which at the time were a place of segregation for not-socially-aligned people, but a great source of unconventional art. Once arrived back in Paris, that same year, he started writing about the art that he found in Switzerland, and he called it *Art Brut*. From that year the artist started buying, recording and collecting art brut works. A book on the topic got released in 1949 by *Dubuffet*, and titled *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels*, in English *The art brut preferred to cultural art*.

In the book one can read the definition that the author gave to the newly discovered art brut (1949: n.d., quoted in *Collection de l'art brut Lausanne* n.d.):

By this [Art Brut] we mean pieces of work executed by people untouched by artistic culture, in which therefore mimicry, contrary to what happens in intellectuals, plays little or no part, so that their authors draw everything (subjects, choice of materials employed, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of writing, etc.) from their own depths and not from clichés of classical art or art that is fashionable. Here we are witnessing an artistic operation that is completely pure, raw, reinvented in all its phases by its author, based solely on his own impulses. Art, therefore, in which is manifested the sole function of invention, and not those, constantly seen in cultural art, of the chameleon and the monkey.

Even though art brut was first researched inside a psychiatric hospital, it does not cover works exclusively by asylum patients, on the contrary. Art brut is a work produced outside of the standards, clichés, and teachings of the art world, as defined above by Dubuffet himself. Therefore, anyone approaching art without great or any education of the topic could produce art brut, as art brut is not defined by beauty standards.

However, beauty standards are not necessarily followed in the decision of what art is in the art market as well, as demonstrated by the Cattelan case. What divides the art of the stars of the art market from art brut is then clearly not beauty. Artists of art brut don't care about recognition, property over their works or posterity, explains the director of the art brut collection Sara Lombardi in an interview at Documenta 2022 (Documenta: Art Brut: an evolving notion from 1945 until today 2022: 16.14). The absence of these drives is precisely what distinguishes the stars of the market from the art brut artists.

A beautiful example of art brut production is the Jeanne Tripiet's work. As we can read in the Collection de l'Art Brut archive (Collection de l'Art Brut Lausanne n.d.) she was daughter of a wine merchant, and had a normal life in the district of Montmartre in Paris, where she worked as a saleswoman. At the age of 58 she became interested with spiritualistic doctrines and divination and abandoned her work to dedicate time to this newly found passion. In 1934 she was admitted in a psychiatric hospital, where she continued practicing divination, which she combined and recorded with different media. Her written texts are almost always accompanied, if not completed, by a composition produced with different materials, such as ink, hair dye, nail varnish, sugar and medicines, as described in the collection's archive

(Collection de l'Art Brut Lausanne n.d.). A beautiful example of ink painting with text is the work titled *Vénus et sa succursale astrologique divine* (fig...), from 1937, now part of the collection.

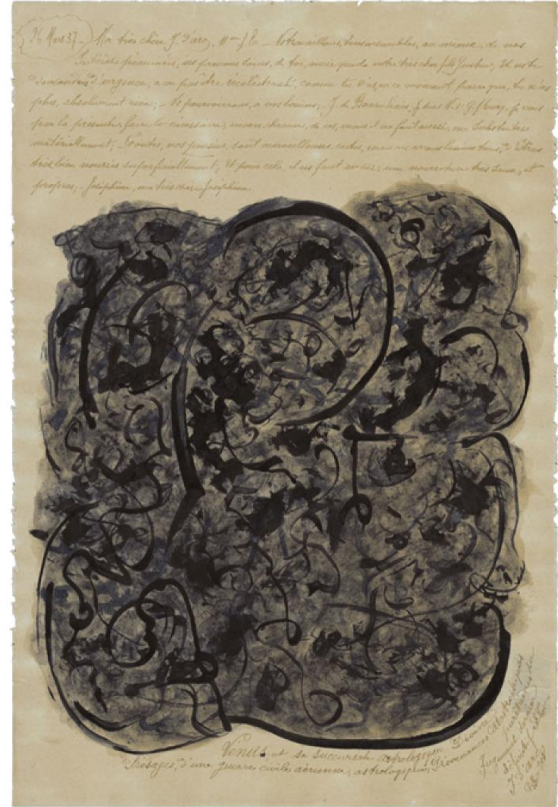


Figure 2 *Vénus et sa succursale astrologique divine*, Tripiet, ink on paper, 1937.

Although her inks are very famous, Tripiet wasn't restricting herself to painting and writing. She loved to express her mediumistic revelation in shape of crochet, creating beautiful free-form-crochet pieces well before it's contemporary use. A beautiful piece, kept in the collection, is

one without title that she produced between 1935 and 1939 (fig...).

In chapter 12 of his book, Tolstoy makes his position on art schools very clear, by saying that if unspoiled by classical forms of teaching, art will show its true and unique shapes. According to the author (Tolstoy 1897 [1904]: ch. XII) every artist will have their distinctive style with no preceding case, and in this way, art will reach its qualitative peak. It seems that art brut possesses the characteristics that Tolstoy says to be necessary for it to be true, sincere, art (1897 [1904]: ch. XV).



Figure 3 Untitled, Tripier, crochet lace 1935-1939.

2. Art for the artist's sake

As defined by Tolstoy, art is such when it is infectious. Defined by the art marked, as Zorloni explains (2011 [2016]: 75-76) art is such when its production meets the requirements of the "senseful process", as a fundamental trait of the artist's brand. It seems difficult to define such a thing as art, and many definitions are possible. However, in this research of a definition of art, it is necessary to ask whether a definition is needed at all. If one would see art as a uniquely intimate act, as an expression of one's self and one's ideas with no need of recognition, as expressed by the case of art brut, there would be no need of a definition. Since all of us are different, there is an infinite number of possible artistic expressions, and for as many people there are in the world, there will be techniques to express ideas and feelings. As one person has a multitude of ideas, often mixed up with feelings, the need to express them doesn't always come in a linear way as the art market would wish to happen. If one would accept to not define art in the previously talked manners, but to conceive it more as simple medium of expression, it would take no time to accept the fact that art is nothing but a language. Art is a language that attempts to express something coming from inside using a non-conventional form of expression, and as any language it can be understood and taught.

If art can be any form of expression, then anything can be art as long as the author declares it to be so, as Duchamp with his ready-mades taught us (Rovati 2015: fig. 18). Then every artist, or better say anyone having the drive to say something in an unconventional way, that gets called art by themselves, can have a multitude of possible languages to express that matter. Therefore, any artist will have a production of various pieces, using different techniques and expressing different matters. Having no use for recognition of what art universally is, one can come to the conclusion that art serves not the buyer or the viewer, but the author themselves. Art certainly doesn't exist for its own sake, not even for the public's one, but it does for the artist's sake.

2.1 My own artistic practice

As mentioned above, attempting to find a definition for the nature of art is superfluous. However, as artist myself I can attempt to explain and show what art is for me, after the definition of art existing for the artist's sake.

I have spent a lot of time thinking of what my production's use could possibly be, and I came to the conclusion that all I produce, all I ever felt the strong wish to create I did for myself. The works I produced under commission, serving a concept that I did not recognise as mine, resulted in good technical works, but lacking a soul. I found myself realising that every work of mine I recognise being valuable is a work I did to exorcise a feeling. The urge to work comes from the impossibility to express something in conventional communication, and so I did produce the most technically various works to put in matter what I felt that needed to be cast out of my mind.

Art is a language, and each emotion, thought or feeling needs its own to be expressed, and so did my own feelings. I often produce one single piece to exorcise an experience, but sometimes painting, drawing, performance, writing and sound all together are needed to end the casting-out process. As an example of this practice that joins several media, I will analyse the case of the piece *Diving Chair*, produced in the year 2021.



Figure 4. *Untitled*, ink on paper, 2020.

In a period of emotional stress, due to problems related with a romantic relationship, I started drawing empty chairs. I never had interested myself in the subject before, but in an occasion of a strong fight with my partner at the time, I started drawing an armchair in the very room where we were fighting not long before. I often use drawing as a mean of emotional release, which at the time was very needed. So, I drew the chair of figure 4 focusing mainly on the shadows quality and how to express it, rather than thinking of the object itself.

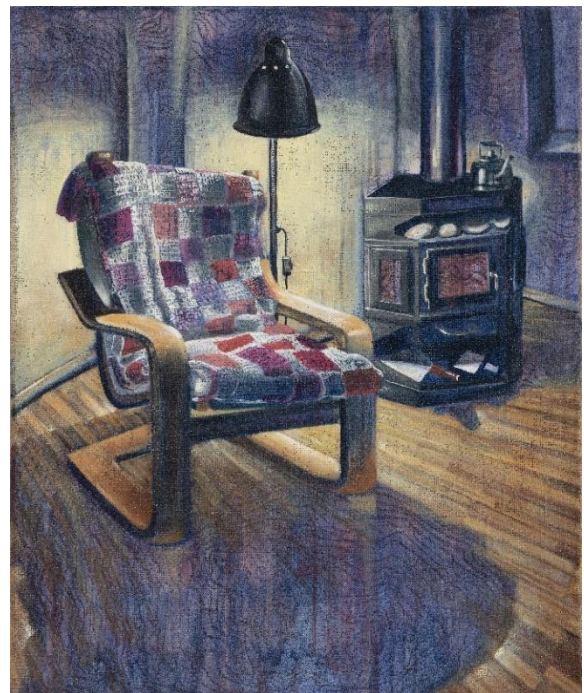


Figure 5. *Diving chair*, oil on jute canvas, 2021.

Without thinking of it much, chairs became one of my most drawn subjects in that period of stress. I was drawing chairs indoor and outdoor, couches and compositions of these two, either from my house or from other people's houses.

Not long came before the very first drawing of the armchair was painted with oil colours on a jute canvas (fig. 5), and I named it *Diving Chair*, as at the time I was focusing on the ability of the shadows to draw in the objects of the painting.

Soon after the conclusion of *Diving Chair* came another painting representing a composition of a chair, a couch and few other interior design elements; I named this work *Sitting in a space*.



Figure 6. Sitting in a space, oil on jute canvas, 2021.

At the time of the production of this last large canvas I was exploring the possibilities of performance practices in the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Die Angewandte) under the guidance of Lucie Strecker, my performance professor. With her I discussed the need to explore the meaning of the chairs populating my paintings, so I started thinking of them and of the possible meaning they might have had. In the attempt to find their meaning, I got quite lost, and started thinking of the meaning itself of sitting rather than standing, the role of chairs in our life and so on. I started recording my voice

while talking out loud of these matters, for then transcribing the whole recording and searching and highlighting the words I used the most. With this highlighted transcript with me, a copy of *Diving Chair* and a chair next to me, I performed in front of my class in an improvisation where I attempted to find an answer to my not well-defined questions. During the performance that lasted around 25 minutes I had a few revelations on the meaning of the chairs in my paintings, which, while I was talking to myself and to the crowd, came to me.



Figure 7 *Sitting between two stools*, video frame, 2022.

That performance signed the start of a healing process and a distancing from those tragically empty chairs. Listening to my urge to draw a new subject, the chair, I had uncovered a truth that helped me heal from the disappearance of an important person from my life.

After that occasion I've been using performance, writing, painting and drawing interchangeably to explore my inner word, as well as to exorcise feelings that needed to be cast away from my mind. Arts, or better say my art practice, has become this for me: a way to serve my own emotional needs, to build a safe path from my heart and my head to the material word. The nature itself of my art practice, that is its privacy and variety, keeps me from wishing to justify it in front of the whole history of arts, as Zorloni suggested in terms of the art market (2011 [2016]: 75-76). But I might as well not wish to have my art understood or felt as their own by its viewers, as Tolstoy wishes for universal art (1897 [1904]: ch. XI). I feel that the meaning of my art practice resides in its ability to exist for my own sake, and for no one else's.

Conclusions

During my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts of Florence I studied Economy of Arts, together with History of Arts, which brought me to better understand the functioning of the art market and its hegemonial power over the definition of art itself. While I could see a pattern of standardisation in the arts we were studying, I was struggling with my own artistic production, or better with my Painting professor at the time. As a painting student I was asked to produce a “senseful process” in my works, which should all be connected by a recognisable style, format and content. I, in my practice, never understood the need to restrict my expression to only one painting technique or media, and I had struggles adapting to the requests of my professor, but in the end I did. At the end of my studies, I produced a collection of paintings showing most of the asked requirements, and I got graduated.

My struggle with the canons of art wasn't certainly over, but I had the occasion to better define my opinion on art's meaning and use. In this paper I analysed artists that helped me realise the meaning of art for me, and not only did these examples help me understand the possible ways of art, but also helped me to recognise its variety of languages of expression. After realising this I decided to treat art as I feel it to be: a tool of expression, just like the grammar of a language and not the meaning as such, and therefore, possible to transmit and to be taught.

Teaching art techniques, more precisely painting, colour theory and drawing, is my own way to give to others the tools they seek for expressing themselves. I hope to never have to judge a painting of someone by its accuracy, but I know the inner drive to know materials and master techniques as a mean of expression. I do read the critique of Tolstoy (1897 [1904]: ch. XII) on art schools with a hint of preoccupation, because as he says, the prevailing of a given technique on the one coming from the inside of the pupil is a true risk, as teachers sometimes fail to see the abilities of their pupils. However, I see the possible solutions to this problem, and I work towards

mastering them as an art teacher, in the hope to show to my pupils that their art exists only to serve them, and no one else.

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