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CREATOR-INVENTORS

Créateurs – Inventeurs d'art brut

ART BRUT, FOLK ART

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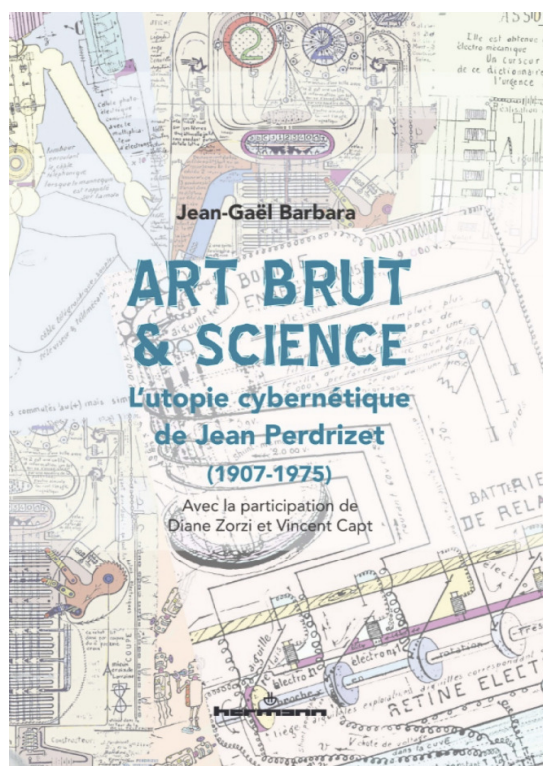


Fig. 1. We can get a clear idea of the links between *art brut* and science in the case of the creator, Jean Perdrizet, by the meticulous analysis of his work from 1923 to 1975. Jean-Gaël Barbara, *Art brut & science, l'utopie cybernétique de Jean Perdrizet (1907-1975)*, Paris, Hermann, 2021.

In the *abcd/Bruno Decharme collection*, now partially donated to the Beaubourg Museum in Paris, the field of science has its rightful place: a family resemblance unites the works by its *créateurs d'art brut* Horst Ademeit, Pedro Cornas, Charles Dellschau, Artur Hagen-Reck, Émile Josome Hodinos, Zdenek Kosek, Alexandre Medvedev, Jean Perdrizet, Lubos Plny, Melvin Way, George Widener and L.C. Spooner around scientific themes and similar procedures for borrowing and transforming scientific language.

In the light of their analysis and recontextualization – within not only the personal backgrounds of these creators, but also the worlds in which they lived or live – we are surprised to discover ever more similarities and overlaps in their motivations, processes and artistic results achieved. In so doing, we gain a clearer understanding, if not of what *art brut* is, at least of one of its frontiers, the one it shares with *science*.

Of all the ways of being-in-the-world experimented with by raw artists, the most active and constructive is undoubtedly that of the *creator-inventor*, whose work is a scientific utopia, nonetheless rooted in the world. The work of Jean Perdrizet, a former technical assistant of the *Ponts et Chaussées* civil engineering company, reveals the invention of spiritist machines, robots (Fig. 2), a universal language and rockets in the 1940s-1970s, during the era of cybernetics, with the aim of communicating with the dead in interstellar space. This work essentially represents a "cybernetic utopia of communication with the dead", combining the modernity of calculating machines and robotics, as well as the emergence of cognitive science, with more ancient elements, such as spiritism¹.

¹ Jean-Gaël Barbara, "L'œuvre de Jean Perdrizet, entre invention scientifique et utopie", in *Jean Perdrizet, Deus ex machina*, cat. exp., Paris, galerie Christian Berst, 2012.

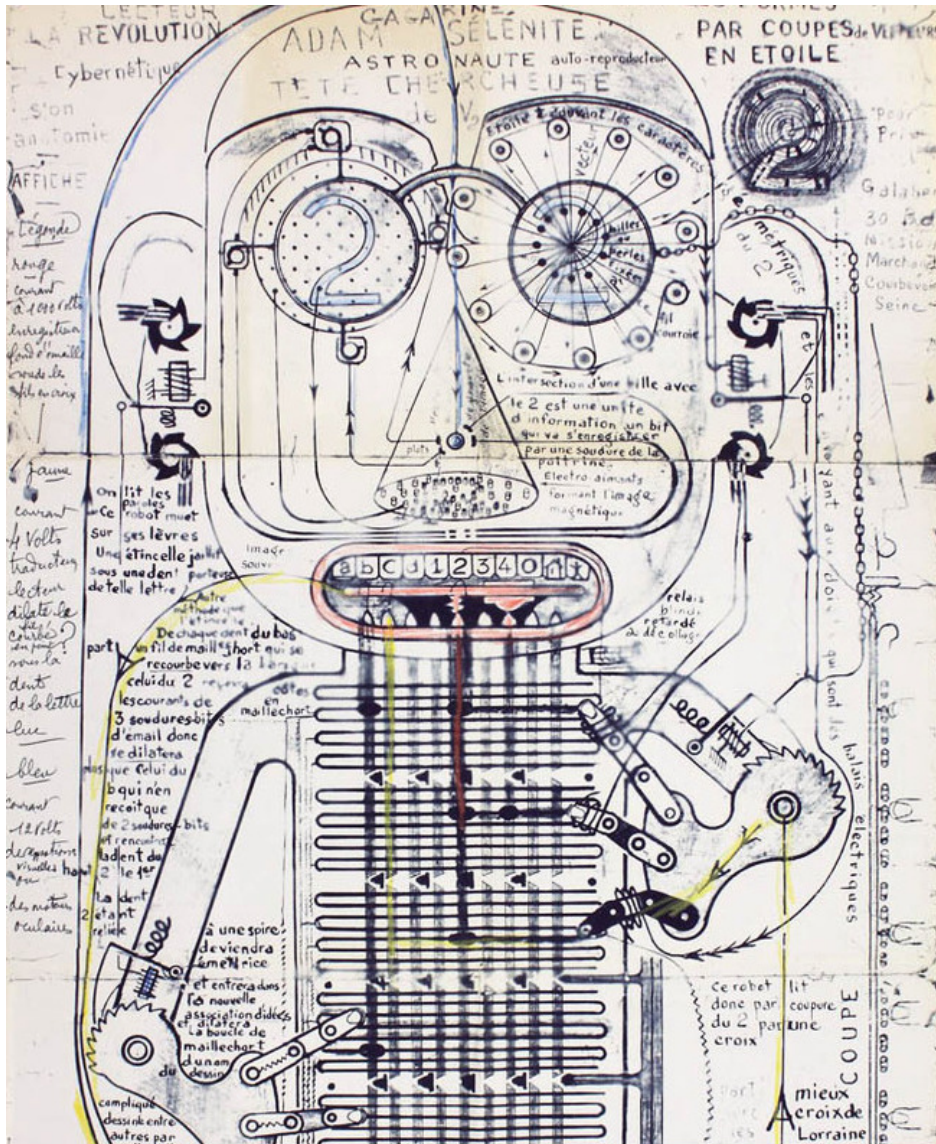


Fig. 2. Jean Perdrizet's intelligent robot of the 1950s
(Archives nationales, galerie Christian Berst).

L.C. Spooner, whom I have identified as the lawyer and apparently self-taught engineer Lee Cordova Spooner² from St. Louis, Missouri, created self-propelled machines (Fig. 3) in secrecy and he developed his utopia, common to Perdrizet and Dellschau, of a mysterious autonomous motor, whose energy source remains absent or invisible. Like Perdrizet, who has a stamp qualifying him as an "inventor", Spooner signs with the word "inventor", legitimized by the cigar-selling machine patent he officially registered with the *US Patent Office* in 1904, and which lead to the realization of this machine the same year. But Spooner's drawings, concealed in a fashion catalog, open onto a secret world, where visions of self-propelled machines invade everyday tasks in the age of the automobile.

² See Jean-Gaël Barbara, *Art brut & science, l'utopie cybernétique de Jean Perdrizet (1907-1975)*, Paris, Hermann, 2021, Fig. 1.

While Perdrizet's and Spooner's utopias have an obvious personal dimension, referring to the lives of their authors and to essential human dreams and anxieties, they are also linked to specific historical contexts. In this way, these works become sounding boards, underlining the overconfidence associated with certain scientific advances specific to a given period.

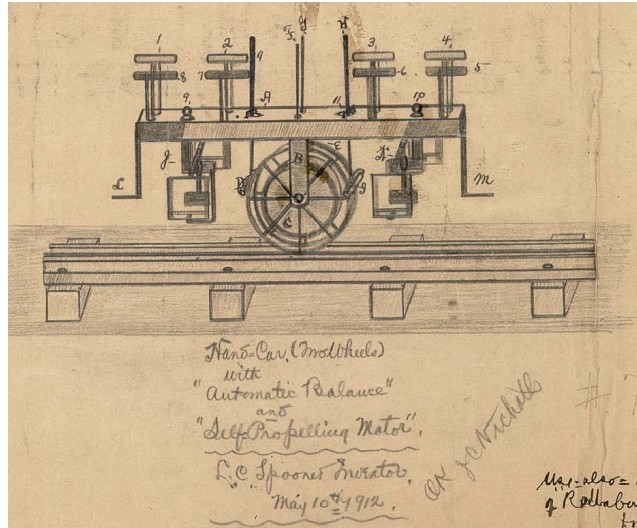


Fig. 3. One of Spooner's self-propelling machine (*abcd* collection).

Dellschau's work is itself obsessed with the conquest of the air, from the first balloons in the 18th C. to the rapid progress of aviation in the 20th C. Like Perdrizet, Dellschau devoured the press, cataloguing clippings about the war, its technological aspects and, above all, flying machines of all kinds (Fig. 4): he imagined a world, the coded details of which yielded no verifiable information, into which he entered by inventing for himself the role of scientific draughtsman for a mysterious club of inventors.



Fig. 4. Dellschau press clippings about the war and its flying machines.

The most delirious creators see themselves at the center of a complicated cosmogony. And the supreme awareness of the complexity of the world that imposes itself on them through a multitude of sensations and free associations, they transcribe in annotations, diagrams and drawings with the aim of scientifically dominating the creative act of which they themselves are the center. The contemporary artist Kosek, typographer and cartoonist, translates into his drawings the feeling that phenomena in the world are predestined, and that sometimes his own actions exert a direct influence on them. Both Kosek and Ademeit perceive the world as dangerous, and their work consists, for the former, in protecting themselves against climatic disasters, or, for the latter, in defending themselves against "cold rays", both adopting an approach with a systematic scientific allure akin to obsession.

The resulting worldviews are sometimes more formal, static and aesthetically pleasing, such as Cornas' complex planetary system (Fig. 5), Hagen Reck's "planetarium" or Medvedev's system of "universe scales". What is most intriguing is that, at the heart of a construction partly made up of rational elements, we also find, as in any science – but here in an existential, artistic and non-scientific way – non-rational elements, such as the misappropriation of symbols, the invention of codes and the use of pseudo-scientific knowledge. Medvedev provides an example of this, using an iridological cartography³ at the center of a collage (Fig. 6).

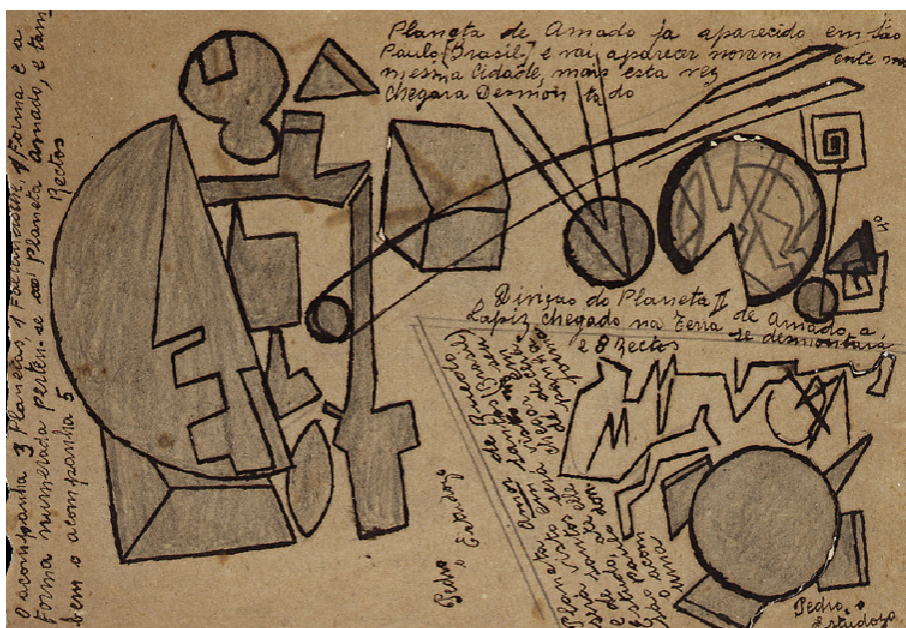


Fig. 5. A complex planetary system of Cornas (*abcd* collection)

³ Iridology is a pseudo-science that claims to identify organic diseases based on associations with variations in iris coloration, with each sector corresponding to an internal organ. In reality, there are very few correlations between iris coloration and pathologies.



Fig. 6. An iridological cartography used by Russian astronomer Medvedev in a collage.

In addition, these worlds often possess a magical and secret dimension expressed through the use of scientific symbols, or more often through a detour of these symbols, as in Kosek's diagrams, Way's chemical symbols associated with mathematical formulas (Fig. 7), or Perdrizet's decomposition of letters into ideograms. Behind Way's bills, it's also possible to see a code whose formulas, according to him, have real power. The magical aspect of these bills, which he kept in his pockets in prison as if to protect himself from mysterious assaults (like Ademeit or Kosek), can be seen in the phonetic writing of the word *Will-o'-the-wisp* (will-o'-the-wisp) as "*Willow the Wisp*", which also refers to a musical group. Another cryptic reference to music is the wording "Prince Kristo [Peter]", which appears to be a reference to the album "*Melodica minimale – Peeter Prince*" by Kristo Kao and Jorma Puusaag.



Fig. 7. One of Way's bill with magic formulas

While the works we have just discussed may at first touch us, their significance is only revealed through a careful inspection of certain details, a conscious search for hidden meanings and a confrontation with the life paths of their creators. For they are witnesses to their time, whose scientific dreams, tensions and aporias they experience. Our interest in them lies in the fact that their activity is similar to that of men of science, sometimes even anticipating it⁴, and blurs into the same visions, along a frontier that extends as far as *art brut*.

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⁴ Such is the case with Jean Perdrizet and his concept of the imaginative robot. See J.G. Barbara, *op. cit.*, 2021.