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**The National College of Art and Design  
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**A Critical Analysis of Jean Dubuffet's Theories on Art  
Brut**

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## Introduction:

In 1968 William Rubin stated, "Dubuffet in my estimation the only major painter to emerge in Europe after World War II, stood outside the main trends of French art" (Glimcher, 1978, p.3).

For the duration of his lengthy career Jean Dubuffet was a subversive, a "provocateur", he endeavoured to free himself and others from what he regarded as the oppressive nature of culture. As he saw it culture had a negative impact on creativity. It smothered and digested individualism and originality by categorising it and putting it on a shelf. He detested the way that throughout history certain respected individuals had selected the supposed "great artworks" of their respective lifetimes, and placed these in museums and galleries, to be regarded by society as awesome and esteemed works of genius. He hated society's unquestioning reliance on the judgement of this select group and the reverence people displayed for museum artworks. As Pierre Bourdieu said, the museum takes upon itself "the function that the cultural class assigns to its culture, which is to impress on some the sense of exclusion" (Thevoz, 1976, p.11). Dubuffet defined culture as being merely knowledge of past works.

He produced a variety of statements, essays, instructions and manifestoes based upon his avant-garde ideas. Despite his numerous publications however he always insisted that he was primarily a painter. He asked his audience to put their trust in his paintings, rather than his written words. His opinions were always biased; "passioné, never neutral or detached", as Thomas Messer described them. (Peppiatt, Lloyd, 1990, p.46-47). He claimed that "Michelangelo cut marble like salami", (in conversation with Messer) and reserved a certain wrath against the Greeks, who, he said, first stole things from Egypt and then inflicted them on Europe. Dubuffet realised and admitted his shortcomings as a writer. As a rule he had little faith in the concept of writing being a form of communication or culture, he admired societies where the only form of communication was oral.

The Westerner's idea that culture is the business of books, paintings a monuments is childish; and it is likely that the most highly intellectual nations left no traces of this sort, nor any traces at all, perhaps - and that among them thought was only expressed





orally. (Dubuffet, 1986, p.18)

This thesis is an exploration of the ideas expressed by Dubuffet in his published writings and the motives behind them. As one of the most ardent exponents of anti-establishment views Dubuffet attracted my attention through his interest and involvement with what is considered by society as "Outsider Art". On the whole I find his ideas and statements refreshing and sometimes amusing. His finaticism makes them so. His theories as they are in the raw, are definately revolutionary and hold their relevance and validity even today. His actions however did not always concur with his expressed ideals and it is for this reason that I personally reserve some scepticism for Dubuffet and his anti cultural stance. Granted, most theories when put into practice never adhere strictly to their original aims or rules and I do admit to being suitably respectful of the passion and dedication which he displayed for Outsider Art. The manner in which he expresses himself is, as already illustrated, often extreme and even this fact alone makes him more susceptible to certain criticism.

The factors that led to the occurance, as such, of "Art Brut" are examined alongside Dubuffet's essay "l'Art Brut préféré aux art culturels" which accompanied the first Art Brut exhibition.

A further exploration of the post war climate in Paris is undertaken and an investigation of Dubuffet's ideas on culture as expressed in *"Asphyxiating Culture"*

Finally, Dubuffet's non-conformist views on insanity and art of the insane are questioned as is the relevance of his theories in relation to art produced today, in the late twentieth century.





## **Chapter 1**

### **Factors leading to the establishment of the Art Brut Society**



Dubuffet made his commitment to painting at the age of forty one, a late entrance in the profession perhaps, but as he said, "Everyone could be a painter....painting is like speaking or walking" (Glimcher, 1987, p.3)..

This view was in opposition to the established views which were based on a western myth that claimed the artist was somehow magically endowed with talent and therefore above the "Common Man". Six months as an art student in the Académie Julian in Paris filled him with a lifelong repugnance for the social and cultural status of the artist. In Dubuffet's opinion all that was necessary to become an artist was work and experience of living. The only way of combatting the established culture was to invent an alternative one.

In the aftermath of World War Two destruction and depression Dubuffet and his contemporaries entered a time of rejection of the old values and a newly awakened interest in the primitive arts. Dubuffet had no feeling of patriotism or alignment with the allied position during the war; during war time his main concern was his new exploration into the possibilities of materials. He was inspired by a trip he took to Africa where the use of sand presented new possibilities for his work. Other artists at this time were looking to art produced in Africa and Oceania. Art produced in these countries had long been sneered at by colonial imperialist societies of the West who sought to justify their actions of destroying these cultures. Earlier than 1950 artists like Vlaminck and Nolde and Kirchner began to take an interest in these "primitive arts". Primitive Art embodied a vital source which had become deadened in Western art. They saw African or Oceanian art embodied spontaneity and instinct.

Today however we know that what the primitive artists created was all strictly governed and regulated by religion and tradition. Once this is realised it becomes obvious that both societies (Western and "primitive") were conditioned by their respective cultures in the 1940's.

There was also a growing interest in the mental illness and the art of the insane. There were two major exhibitions of psychiatric art in Paris in



1948 and 1950, which proved to be extremely popular with the public as well as those artists interested in the art of the insane.

This awakened interest in primitive art was hardly surprising after Hitler imposed measures to prevent avant-gardism, during the occupation of Paris. In 1935 Hitler made a speech in which he said the following, "What we see under the pretext of 'the cult of the primitive' is not the expression of an innocent naive soul, but totally corrupt and morbid depravity" (J.L.Terrier, 1989, p.342).

Writers and artists such as Fautrier, Wols and Chaissac found inspiration in these new sources. The work they produced followed many routes, namely a celebration of the "common man", a resurgence of the surrealism, an interest in states of consciousness and mental freedom in which the production of primitive art took place. Dubuffet addressed his work to the "common man" also, who by his definition was " anyone who fails to understand that there are beautiful things and ugly things and doesn't really worry about either "(Glimcher, 1989, p.127).

Dubuffet was concerned with the accepted notions of beauty and aesthetics in art. When asked about a series of paintings which he did, entitled "*Corps des Dames*", (figure 1), he said that,

the female body, of all objects in the world, is the one that has long been associated with (for occidentals) a very specious notion of beauty....now it pleases me to protest against this aesthetic which I find miserable and most depressing.  
(Glimcher, 1989, p.10)

The figure in these paintings appears to be squashed, split open, laid down, the woman becomes a landscape. The apparent aim of this way of painting the nude was to rebel against accepted standards of portraiture. He insisted that these paintings were like primitive magic cult images in that they were " anti-psychological, anti individualistic, and depersonalising". The paintings were depersonalising in the sense that the figures contain no likeness by traditional standards. He did not aim to produce a standardised version of aesthetic correctness. He asked that people looked on this work, instead, as an "enterprise for the rehabilitation of scorned values" ( Glimcher,





1989, p.10).

Many of the people who saw Dubuffet's exhibitions in the Drouin Gallery were shocked not only by the images but by the materials with which he painted. A preoccupation with material was also evident in the work of Tapiés and Fautrier. Use of non-conventional materials, like sand, tar, gravel etc was another non-conformist statement. These substances, referred to as "haute paté", became the subject of lectures given by Bachelard in the Collège de France during the occupation. He considered these new materials to be "primal matter, the stuff of life". He said, "These first material images are dynamic, active, they are linked to desires that are simple, astonishingly crude" (F.Morris, 1993, p.34).

Bachelard identified the use of elementary materials with the infant's first material grasp of the world, the "male joy of penetrating into substance". Time was inscribed in the matter itself.

Art critics for the most part were less than complimentary towards these paintings. Published remarks included the following, "Buffon, Charaton, paints with excrement, a pimple scratching aesthetic". (F.Morris, 1993, p.51). These terms were most likely used to disguise their incomprehension. Dubuffet's anarchical views prevented him from taking these criticisms to heart. He associated art critics with the bourgeoisie and intellectuals whom he despised. His first supporters however came from the intellectuals who were gravitating around Jean Paulhan, a well known author. Tapié, another early admirer of Dubuffet wrote, "We find in Dubuffet all the magical incantatory charm of these richly elementary signs that a dumbly resigned scepticism has discreetly buried...All of this very subtle art, too subtle for the academy which has seen fit to classify it quite separately". (Glimcher, 1989, p.9 ).

Dubuffet and Tapié's art were simply reflecting current directions of thought within the scientific community and following paths parallel to contemporary existentialist and phenomenological writing. "Peindre ce n'est pas teindre", said Dubuffet in *Notes for the Well Read* . (Glimcher, 1989, p.77 )





Dubuffet's art, as his essays will testify, was based on the premise that each human being has their own individual and completely personal notion of reality. Traditional and modern art are bound by conventions - they have rules of perspective, colour balance and composition. This is what people have come to expect from art, and this is also what Dubuffet has always challenged. For fifty years everything he did was in the name of revolution. He was not the first revolutionary of course. Paul Klee, for example, was one of the first who challenged the conventionality of art ; "Art does not reproduce what is visible; instead it makes visible". Klee was incidently one of the first admirers of Dubuffet. Dubuffet saw absolutely no point in regurgitating the past by means of repeating convention. The task of the artist as he saw it was that of creating new individual realms of images and imaginings.

Various factors lead to Dubuffet's growing interest in the art of the insane. His early encounter with a clairvoyant and a book received by Hanz Prinzhorn entitled "*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*", number among these factors. Prinzhorn's book had a major effect on Dubuffet as it did on other interested artists. Dubuffet did not read German himself so the impact of the book was purely from the images it contained. The works which Prinzhorn presented were mostly gathered from schizophrenic patients and were produced without instructions from therapists. The book investigated the urge of the patients to express their psychic condition and their fascination with personal symbolism. A common thread running through alot of the drawing was symmetry and rhythm of form. One of the conclusions drawn by Prinzhorn from his research was that where the patient had had the least amount of exposure to culture, artistic creativity was more evident. This finding synchronised with Dubuffet's then current theories about the cultural influence of man.

In 1949 George Bataille wrote

...it is true that the movement <sup>towards</sup> wholeness begins with madness...  
It is, in our time, accessible to only a few isolated individuals  
through mental disorder conjoined with unquestionable vigor.  
He can if chance is with him, discern in incoherence  
an unforeseen balance. (Franzke, 1981, p.72)



This was also the belief of Dubuffet and other radical thinkers of the time who viewed insanity as a completely open and unaffected state of mind, an ideal condition for the production of "real art". Before Bataille and Dubuffet, Arnult Rainer had also become fascinated by insanity and its possibilities. These writers portrayed insanity as almost a desirable condition, and one to which they all aspired.

It was in this vein that Dubuffet began his collection of artworks of the insane in 1945. He travelled to Switzerland visiting variuos psychiatric hospitals and gathered work with the initial intension of putting a book together on the subject. Eventually however he had collected such a vast amount of work that he considered exhibiting his collection. Dubuffet decided to call his type of art, "Art Brut" which he defined as " works executed by people free from artistic culture, for whom mimesis, as opposed to what happens to intellectuals, plays little or no part....We have here a 'chemically pure' artistic operation". ( Osborne, 1981, p.24).

He collected for three years before he set up "Compagnie de l'Art Brut" in 1948 with artists and writers including André Brêton, Jean Paulhan and Michel Tapie. Dubuffet during this time built a large and expanding collection of works that were entirely outside any then perceived notion of art. He collected not only from those locked away in psychiatric wards, but he also discovered work from other "Outsiders" who created art with a happy indifference to the cultural institutions and the problems with which they were concerned. Exhibitions of paintings by Wolfi, Aloise, Muller and many others were held in the Drouin Gallery in Paris. So enthused was Dubuffet with his new discoveries that his own work became influenced by theirs. He chose these insane artists as his masters. His work however was attacked by critics as being either insane or calculatedly insane. His personal work was constantly compared to work of children and the insane. On the surface critics described his work as graphic demonstration of a laboriously achieved infantilism.

These criticisms were not completely unfounded however. For example strong similarities exist between Dubuffet's "l'Homme à la Rose"





1949, (figure 2) and a drawing by Anton Müller called "A ma femme" (figure 3). Dubuffet admitted a debt he owed to Muller and those like him, whose work he so much admired and was very aware that on occasion their influence on his own personal work was so strong as to justify accusations of imitation on his part. Dubuffet throughout his career however was always having to put up with accusations and slander on his artwork and his writing. Maybe not undeservedly however; his statements were provocative and frequently insulting. He wanted to change peoples perception of art, and that surely was a very difficult, if not impossible task to perform.

He antagonised museum and gallery officials, ministers for culture, police, any form of authority. He was clearly anarchical in his political viewpoint, which is a factor which leaves his statements open to some criticism. Clement Greenburg was one of the many who disputed Dubuffet's definition of Art Brut and his methods of selection. Greenburg claimed that what Dubuffet called Art Brut, was nothing less than obscenities scrawled on the walls of public toilet walls and sidewalks, and these, he claimed, were very far removed from primitive. He also said that Dubuffet misunderstood his own discovery by "lumping" Art Brut together with primitive art.

For the first major exhibition of Art Brut in 1949 Dubuffet prepared a catalogue; *"l'Art Brut préféré aux Arts Culturels"*. This contained his first published definition of the concept of Art Brut. In his essay Dubuffet takes a dim view of the group regarded by society as intellectuals, he sees them as the culprits who have deadened human creativity with a handed down culture. He refers to professors and other acknowledged experts in society as being nothing more than overaged school boys, imperialists who seek to distinguish themselves from the common people. Intellectuals by his definition, are those people lacking in clairvoyance whereas those considered imbecilic or insane by intelligent society have a much greater aptitude in this field. "What our bespectacled professors ought to do is curette their brains". (Glimcher, 1989, p.101)

His suggestions appear somewhat extreme. Not least when he suggested that these learned men should commit "a mass Hara Kiri of the



intelligence, a huge leap into extra-lucid imbecility". He furthermore states that art cannot be idea-based, a view surely in opposition with today's mainstream art. According to Dubuffet an art based on ideas is worthless and shallow, he advocates a clarvoyant/spiritual process for the production of art to his readers. Art by his reckoning is only "true" when it does not seek recognition or appraisal. Towards the end of "*l'Art Brut préféré aux arts culturels*" he says that "Madness unburdens a person, giving him wings and helping his clarvoyance". There is accordingly no such thing as art of the insane just as there is no such thing as art by "people with bad knees", but surely by virtue of the fact that Dubuffet spent a great deal of his time in search of art works by people who were mentally ill and by his own categorisation of these works as something quite separate from established art, he was in fact distinguishing this type of art, making it something quite apart from "Art Proper".





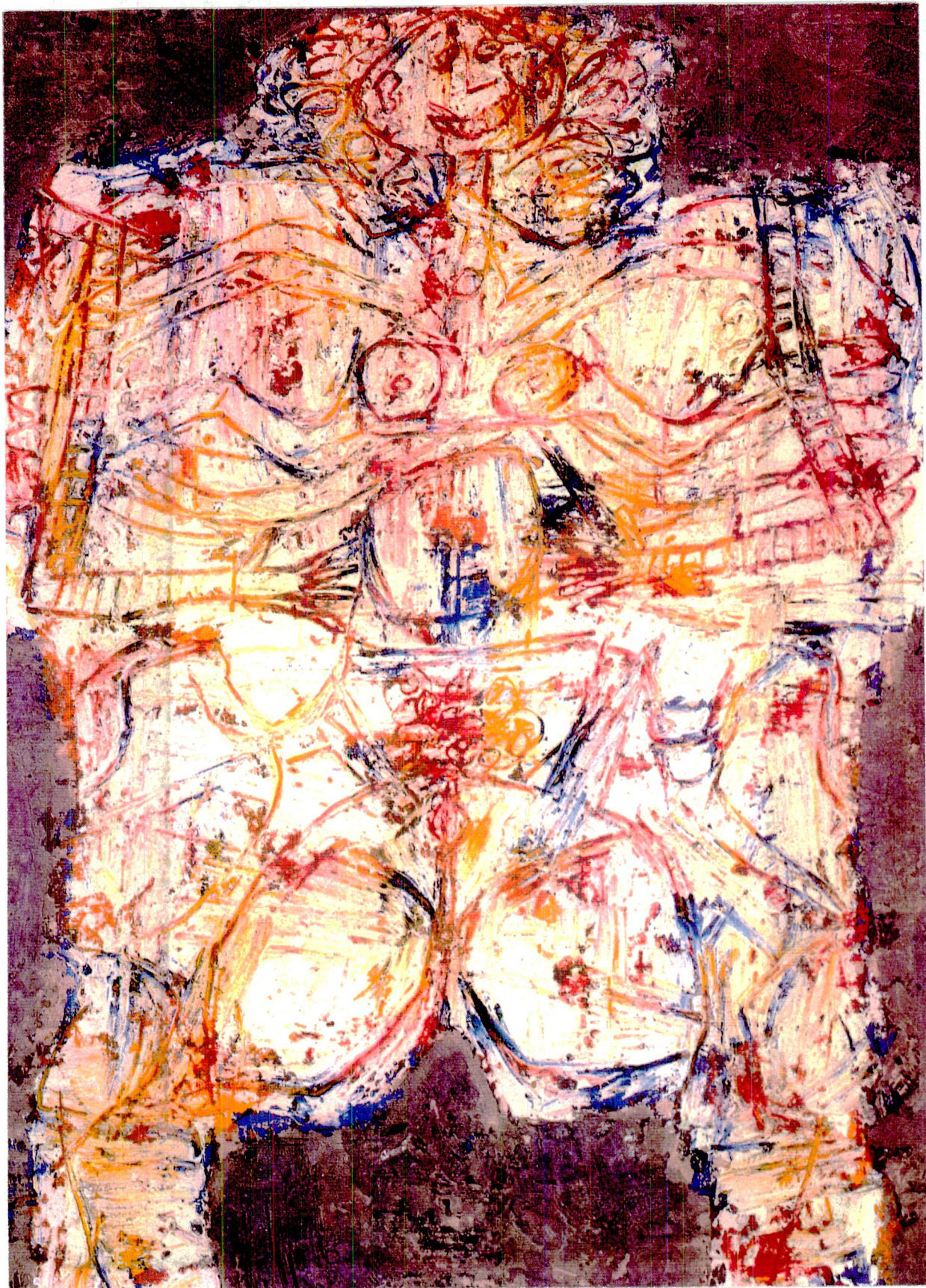


Figure 1 : Jean Dubuffet, "*Corps des Dames*" \_1950







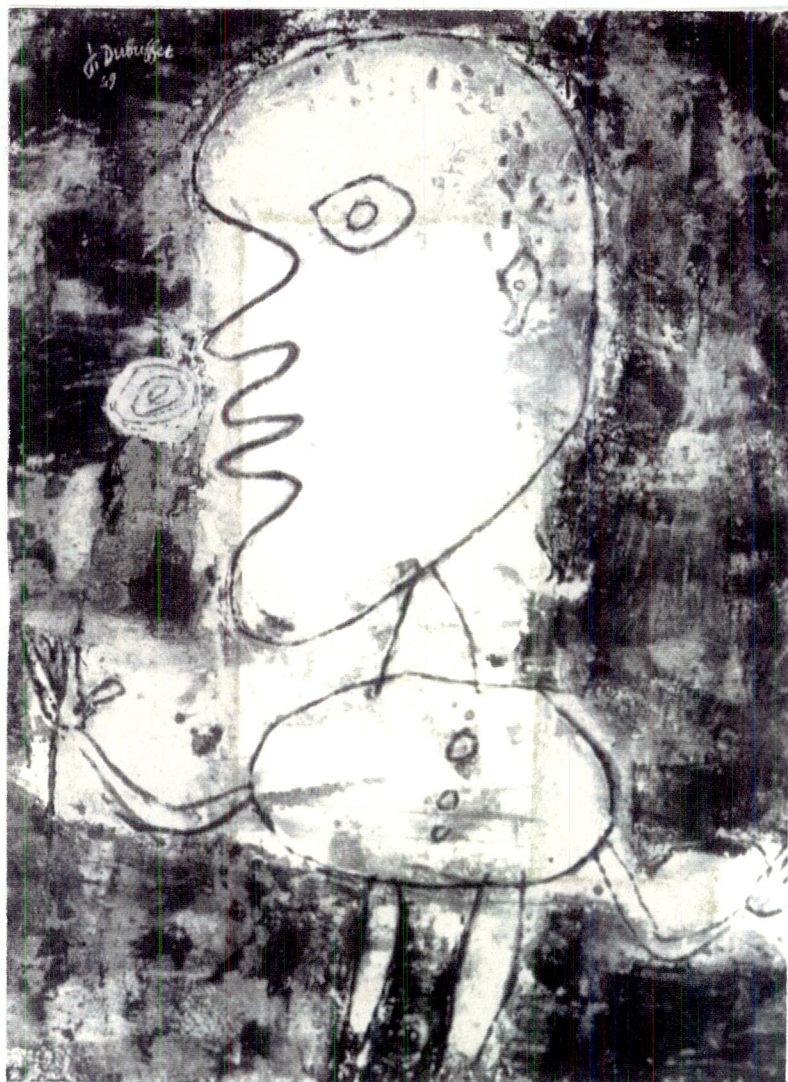


Figure 2 : Jean Dubuffet, *l'Homme a la Rose* 1949

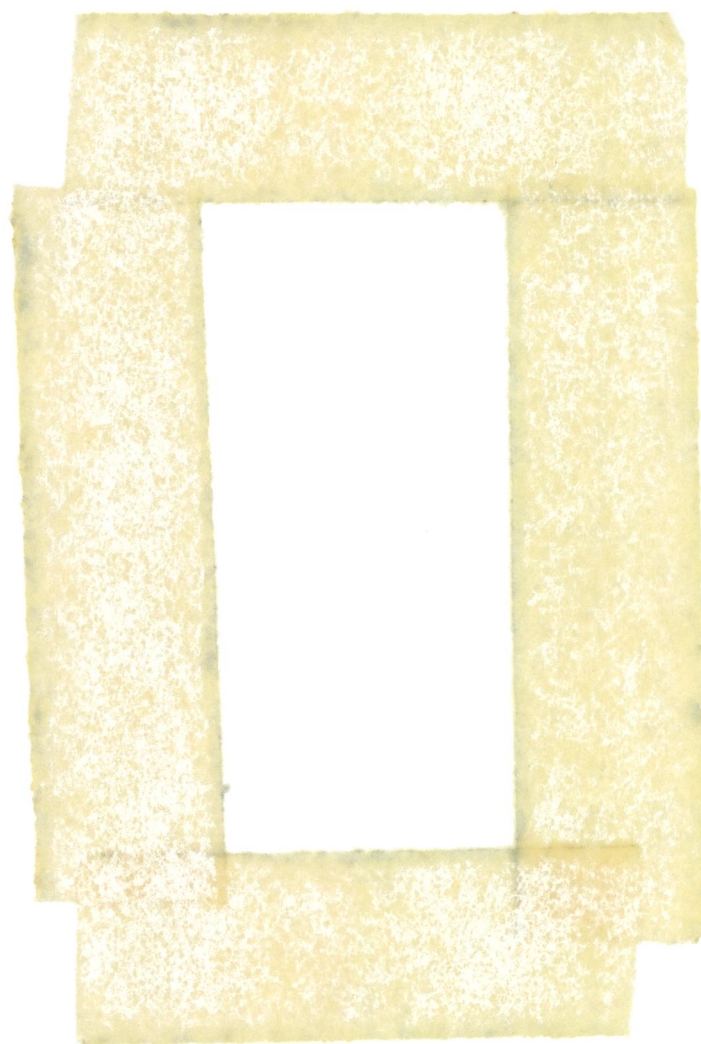
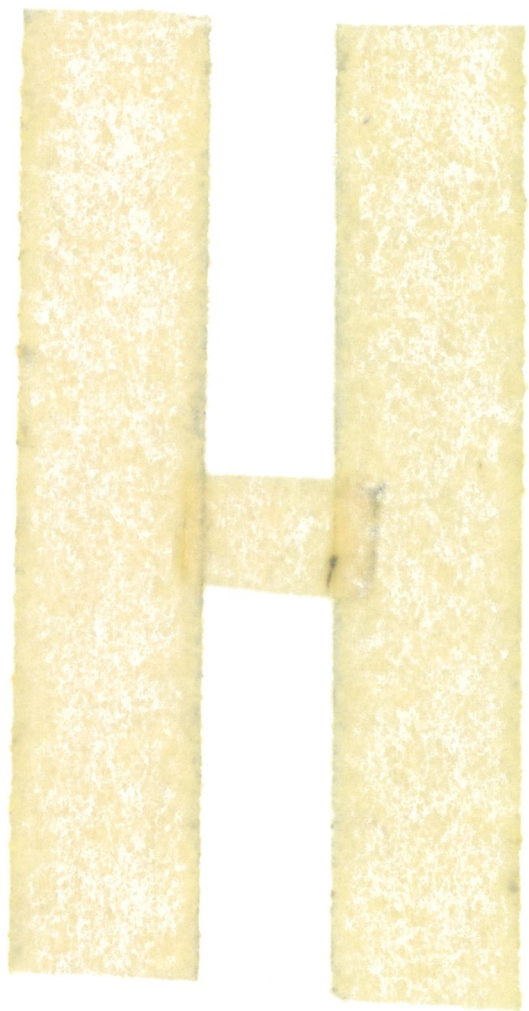




Figure 3 : Anton Muller, *A ma femme*





## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Post War Climate of Paris and “Asphyxiating Culture”**





"I haven't quite got round to any precise conception of what existentialism actually is... Nonetheless I feel and declare myself to be warmly existentialist" (F.Morris, 1993, p.34)

Various factors can be said to have led to Dubuffet's anti cultural views. Art Brut occurred at a time in post war Paris when the whole city embraced existentialism as a philosophy, and the word became used as a symbol for nihilism and extreme attitudes. Stories from concentration camps reached France, then came the news of the first ever atomic bomb, which destroyed Nagasaki and Hiroshima. These events signified the ultimate demonstration of the revenge of technology on its creators and the hypocrisy in the Western tradition of enlightenment and progress.

Sartre introduced his theories based on German phenomenology in which he rejected abstract reasoning in favour of observation and description. In 1946 he delivered a lecture, "Existentialism is a humanism" in which the basic tenet of his argument was explained; "existence comes before essence". The individual should strive to be a "man to the very limit, to the absurd, to the night of unknowingness". (E.L.Smith, 1969, p.194) Existentialism in post war Paris promoted the feeling that man was alone in the world and that the established system of beliefs was no longer valid. Sartre used the "artist" as a paradigm for authentic existence, "In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait" (F.Morris, 1993, p.18).

Sartre wanted artists to reinvent art, to create without preconceptions. He was interested in art that reflected his own philosophies and in the status of art as an imaginary object. He, like Dubuffet, claimed that there were no aesthetic values. In some respects existentialism was not unlike surrealism as they both placed emphasis on subjectivity. Existentialism became a continuation of surrealism and the same time a rejection of it. Sartre rejected it as it was concerned only with man's unconscious and with dreams, whereas existentialist philosophy dealt with the "totality of man".

Silence was a part of the post war art in Paris. Sartre's notion of man's alienation from man explored the impossibility of authentic



communication between individuals. Art too was beyond language. Dubuffet said to name something was to destroy it. Common metaphors in writings and paintings of this era include; engulfing space, human frailty, isolation and fear. These metaphors, which were familiar in existentialist literature brought about a free exchange of ideas that bound artists and writers. Sartre wrote about the hollowness of the appearance of normality in occupied Paris, a subject dealt with by Dubuffet also in a series of paintings which he did during the occupation.

After the war many writers and artists became scapegoats in an attempt by the government to "purify" society and culture; ("epuration"). Dubuffet became involved in an anti-epuration journal, "Cahiers de la Pleiade" along with Artaud and Ponge. The years 1945 to 1946 saw an attempted revival of interest in the old masterpieces on the governments behalf, through an exhibition held in the Grand Palais. The notion of "cultural property" was at a premium.

In reply to this a number of artists and writers emerged and reacted to the horrors of communist rule, the threat of atomic destruction, a third world war and the news of the Soviets reopening labour camps in Germany. Bram van Velde wrote in 1948, "...The sensitive man or the artist can only be sick in our civilised life full of lies....painting is man confronting catastrophe". (F.Morris, 1993, p.33).

Bergson and Bachelard were writers who provided sources for post war artists even before Sartre. Dubuffet attended lectures given by the latter during the occupation. The paintings he produced during this era which were known as the "Murs" series depicted the violent anarchic area of Paris known as the "Zone" (figure 4). Dubuffet believed this area was frequented by the "common man".

Dubuffet always appeared to have a deep rooted faith in the supposed "common man". He believed this character was unaffected by the trappings of culture and society, yet ironically when Dubuffet established his permanent collection of Art Brut in the Drouin Gallery it was presided over by an elitest group of like-minded artists, (Brêton, Paulhan and Tapie) and





the works could be viewed by appointment only, making it inaccessible to Dubuffet's hero, the common man.

He privately printed booklets on the artists in the exhibitions. The exhibitors themselves do not appear to have been very much involved in the society beyond contributing their work. They could be seen almost to have been exploited by the group. Many of the artists were unaware of what happened to their work after it had been selected by Dubuffet on his hospital rounds. Inconsistency does seem to be a feature of the Art Brut society on the whole, even when the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* was disbanded, André Bréton attacked the very notion of Art Brut calling it the "art of madmen" and maintained that it should be distinguished as a separate entity. The company was established again in 1962 with the slightly larger membership of one hundred, keeping it along the same lines as the first small group, that of an almost secret society whose collection was guarded and inaccessible to the public, unless one applied for a waiting list appointment to see the collection. Indeed according to Tapié, Dubuffet's "Common Man" was also somewhat of an existentialist, being "entirely open, aware of himself in the present and his potential future and in certain signs as old as the world" (F.Morris, 1993, p.34)

Tapié published his manifesto calling for "Un Art Autre" in 1952 which called for an art free of formal aesthetic conventions. Dubuffet's work was featured in this journal alongside that of Wols and Fautrier. Tapié drew on the language of existentialism to justify his philosophy. Individualism, authenticity, aggression and violence were celebrated. Dubuffet was clearly affected by existentialism and the general post war atmosphere in Paris. Sartre and Dubuffet were joined by their contemporaries in their search for solutions in the work of Heidegger and the phenomenologists. Sartre made reference to the Informal paintings of Tapié and Dubuffet in his writings, "*The Imagination*" and "*The Psychology of the Imagination*", (1936 and 1940) wherein he opened up the question of the imagined versus the perceived. He discussed the irrational "magic" status of the image, and although he did not mention the names of any artists in particular, his theories can quite clearly





be linked with the process of art production employed by the "Art Brut" artists. Sartre prompted a free, self determining consciousness which was akin to Dubuffet's ideas about clairvoyance and insanity. Dubuffet's ideas are quite clearly stated in the various essays. At the beginning of this chapter he was quoted as saying he believed himself to be an existentialist. It can also be said that Dubuffet's opinions were anarchical. He disputed the social conditioning which gave rise to the belief that the absence of government would lead naturally to disorder. Anarchists, like Dubuffet, believed that government was extremely harmful, and in getting rid of it one would find "natural order, harmony of the needs and interests of all, complete liberty with complete solidarity" (G.Woodcock, 1977, p.64).

Anarchy means the negation of the principle of authority in social organisations and the hatred of all constraints that originate in institutions founded on this principle. Dubuffet was passionately opposed to the state, culture, intellectualism, and controlled order. He was passionately interested in non-conformism, outsiders in society, violence, clairvoyance, and the possibility of creating an alternative culture on the basis of anti-cultural views. He was interested in making art outside the established realms of taste and aesthetic correctness. Anarchist Theory however states that art should not be exclusive; "it should be an integral part of life as it was in Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages" (G.Woodcock, 1977, p.279). Dubuffet did not respect this aspect of anarchist philosophy evidently, as he made his collection of Art Brut exclusive to his small society of friends and peers (as mentioned earlier), under the pretext of "protecting" it from becoming assimilated into the culture system.

According to Herbert Read..."even the language of art is a communal creation; it represents an agreed system of signs to be used in common" (G.Woodcock, 1979, p.297).

Thus even being an artist is an act of conformity in a sense. Dubuffet endeavoured with his aims and objectives, to reach a balance between theory and practice. He both succeeded and failed in this objective.



## Asphyxiating Culture:

*Asphyxiating Culture* was Dubuffet's biggest manifesto in which he decried conventional art instruction among other things. It was a reaction against the notion of culture in a state where it was controlled by the "Maisons de Culture" (the official ministries), which in most towns in France had set up a system of education backed by a heritage of failproof masterpieces. As with primitive art however Dubuffet neglected to acknowledge that cultural indoctrination was no less strong in other countries where it may not have been so rigidly organised. The conditioning effect of such a culture was such that <sup>nobody</sup> dared to dispute the value of the great "masterworks", those who have never even seen the works, being sometimes the most ardent defenders. Thus, claimed Dubuffet, "Cultural Man" had conceded whole tracts of his mind to the imprint of stereotyped opinions and evaluations, about which no doubt may be voiced. He also maintained that among intellectuals there may in fact be those who doubt the validity of inherited values, but these people would not be willing to admit their doubts, believing that in so doing they could start a chain reaction of events which would lead unavoidably to the discrediting of the established myths.

His ideas at times appear impetuous, due to his character and temperament most probably. As was his style, he defended his anti-cultural stance with a firm conviction. *Asphyxiating Culture* is a product of an era of existentialism and anarchy, both in regard to the society of the time, and the writer personally. He was passionate and irrational about his pet hates, an anarchical philosopher perhaps. But in the end all avant garde revolutions in art turn into history; the slap in the face of culture given by Dada has now been framed and hung on the museum wall.

Dubuffet views art as the monopoly of the privileged intellectual. In a time where, there was a move on the behalf of the government towards promoting the idea of "cultural property" and "épuration", Dubuffet wrote his anti cultural message. He was not impressed by the attempts at rejuvenating interest in what he referred to as "outdated classical works". He condemned the farcical attempts by the "provincial bourgeois" to furnish their homes





with antiques dating back to Louis XV rather than with good taste, convincing themselves in so doing that they themselves were artists, and persuading the lower classes of the necessity to safeguard art. The Ministry for Culture was set up in France after the war, which assumed the task, as Dubuffet saw it, of falsifying information and replacing free culture with a false substitute, and thereby stifling genuine creativity.

In the opening paragraphs of *Asphyxiating Culture* he writes about classism and what he considers the dominant class - the intellectuals who, by their accumulated knowledge of art clearly distinguish themselves from the "common people". But was Dubuffet himself not an intellectual of sorts? He moved in exclusive circles, his contemporaries he found among writers, poets, painters. The members of the "Companie de l'Art Brut" were all professionals, even bourgeois members of society. There was no room for Dubuffet's common man. There were no members of the group who were genuine outsiders. It seems odd that a group of people united in the opinion that only those unaffected by culture could produce true art, were by the nature of their chosen professions, part of a society based on culture. Art Brut itself was not so much anti-cultural as an alternative culture. By inventing a new culture, building an elitist art establishment, however small, Dubuffet contradicted the written principles of the Companie de l'Art Brut. On reading his essays one sometimes gets the impression that Dubuffet was perhaps a paranoid and extremist man. His ideas are on the whole controversial, for instance, there has to be some truth in the statement that "Everyone can be an artist". Painting is as easy as "speaking or walking" if one is to view it in a certain light. On the other hand if everyone can be an artist or indeed if everyone is an artist, how would Dubuffet justify creating a small collection of work which he deemed worthy of recognition as real art, and claim that most other forms of art outside of this are not worthy of that name or attention. In saying that everyone can be an artist, he was attempting to de-mystify the position of the artist in society, he was trying to break away from those Western perceptions of established art and culture to which he was so fond of referring. Michel Thévoz saw westernised art establishment as





ethnocentric, or adult centred, prejudiced which "seemed doomed to distort any other form of expression by the mere fact of taking aesthetic notice of it." (Thévoz, 1976, p.14)

In accordance with the system of assimilating creativity of individuals into the established culture is one of ingestion and homogenisation. The object of art simply ends up in a museum after it has been digested. Dubuffet said that "True art is always where you least expect to find it. Where nobody thinks about it or utters its name...Art is a personage with a passion for going incognito". (Glimcher, 1989, p.101)

Further evidence of Dubuffet's anarchical fervour can be found in *Asphyxiating Culture*. His belief is that culture has taken the place formerly occupied by religion, it had become the "Opiate of the people", with the State monopolising this force, Dubuffet has no trust in either of them. "The State has but one face for me; that of the police" (Dubuffet, 1988, p.11). This face he finds hostile and repulsive and so he claims that caprice, independence and rebellions, things which are generally opposed to the social order, are essential to the good health of an ethnic group. Again he expresses his opposition to imposed order, be it in art production or in governing of people. "The man of culture is as far a cry from the artist as the historian is from the man of action" (Dubuffet, 1988, p.14)

Culture is the main object of Dubuffet's hatred, and those who are associated with it. Intellectuals or "cultured" individuals who are respected by their peers also provide targets for his cynicism. He claims that the Western perception of culture lies in objects such as books, paintings, monuments, these evaluations he considers infantile. He believed that nations of high intellect left none of these things behind them and that among these ancient intelligent peoples thought was expressed only orally. He mocks ancient societies in Greece for example and the Westerner's admiration for these early civilised societies. Surely however credence must be given to the cultural achievement of such societies. Even if there did exist such societies as he described, in which ideas were transmitted without the use of any visual images, some traces of these societies would be found.



Dubuffet does not support this supposition by citing any society in particular.

Culture has also cast discredit upon the creation of art, Dubuffet says. People regard it as some sort of pastime for lazy incompetent people. To some extent this attitude towards artists is still prevalent. Dubuffet reckoned that the artist had a similar standing in society to that of a priest, both of them seemingly officiating over a ceremony devoid of any practical use. Dubuffet intends, in the implementation of his theories, that they would be targeted at the "common people". These are the victims of institutionalised culture. This attitude is quite derogatory as he implores the readers of the essay to exercise his ideas on the common people, assuming that the latter will not be the people reading his doctrines. His attitude and prejudices are once more apparent. The elitism of the Art Brut movement cannot go unquestioned as the society was initially established in response to what was seen as an elitest established culture.

Dubuffet chose the art works for his collection from a group of people he presumed unaffected by culture, yet no no artist is ever graced with complete immunity to culture; as Michel Thévoz admitted "in the extreme, a production totally estranged from culture would be simply imperceptible". Indeed any creative work which achieved absolute independence of a context would simply escape recognition. Some of the artists were even educated or practicing artists before circumstances led to them being classified as Art Brut artists. Dubuffet finds it a hard task to qualify, this viewpoint when he states that in applying the notion of Art Brut to the process of producing art one is actually appealing to an "ideal pole", a point where no artist could be expected to reach. But Dubuffet defends his position by saying that the achievement of the anti-cultural or unaffected state is an aspiration rather than a reality. "Art Brut, savagry, freedom, these should not be conceived as places, nor above all as fixed places, but as directions, aspirations, tendencies". After all what adult can be expected to have escaped all external influences.

Untiringly Dubuffet addressed the questions to an imaginary public





which he considered valid. His audience is the anti-cultural artist who, is faced with a system that demands conformity. To create a work of art with an audience in view would be tantamount to self advertisement and the work would lose its "autistic" dynamism. Dubuffet suggests some kind of method of publication of art which does not utilize the insidious machinery of culture, to reach an audience. His theory contains contradictions; he suggests that the artist turn away completely from the system, but also that the artist make public his creations in order to demonstrate this non-conformism. Dubuffet cites the career of Simone Marye as an example (figure 5). She was a celebrated sculptress who won the praise of such writers as Alexis Léger and André Gide but later when she became hospitalised she produced genuine "autistic" drawings in a mental state far from reality. It was her later work, that she did in hospital, Dubuffet considered exemplary. Dubuffet's suggestion of publication without publicity was however taken on board by the artist Scottie Wilson, who held an exhibition in an empty shop, charged an entrance fee and sold his paintings "like kippers", two at a time. Dubuffet's personal disdain for the blandishments of art galleries, did not stretch as far as Wilson's however, his exhibitions were always held in galleries despite his obvious disrespect for them.

Dubuffet claims in *"Asphyxiating Culture"* that only when art ceases to be seen as an "object" will we be able to dispense with problematic terms such as "art" and "culture" and thereby our perception of creativity will change. This his prophecy, perhaps noble but not realistic. He asks us to abandon our notions of aesthetics and beauty, handed down by a stagnant culture, when looking at Art Brut. This is a worthwhile request when one considers that in truth most Art Brut does not conform with any aesthetic values at all. He asks his audience not to be objective either, as that would imply some method of placing a value on the work. The only way of getting pleasure from these works is through personal caprice. "I am convinced that any object, any place without distinction can become a key of enchantment for the mind according to the way one looks at it and the associations of ideas to which one links it". (R.Cardinal, 1972, p.34)





The ethics of Art Brut are not dissimilar to those behind the Dada movement. Dada was dedicated to the negation of art and the liberation from causality, but it was the negation of everything that eventually led to its demise. The ultimate anti-art movement became institutionalised in history, as Richter put it, "we could not help involving our whole selves including our conscious sense of order, in the creative process, so that in spite of all our anti-art polemics we produced works of art". (Richter, 1965, p.59).

Dada, followed by surrealism was a violent protest against art, literature and morality in society. The surrealist aspirations to banish reason, taste, and conscious will from the process of producing a work of art, are obviously like those expressed by Dubuffet in *Asphyxiating Culture*. In the same way as Dada was assimilated into culture, Art Brut has today become recognised as part of our cultural heritage.





figure 4 : Jean Dubuffet, *View of Paris, Life of Pleasure* 1944



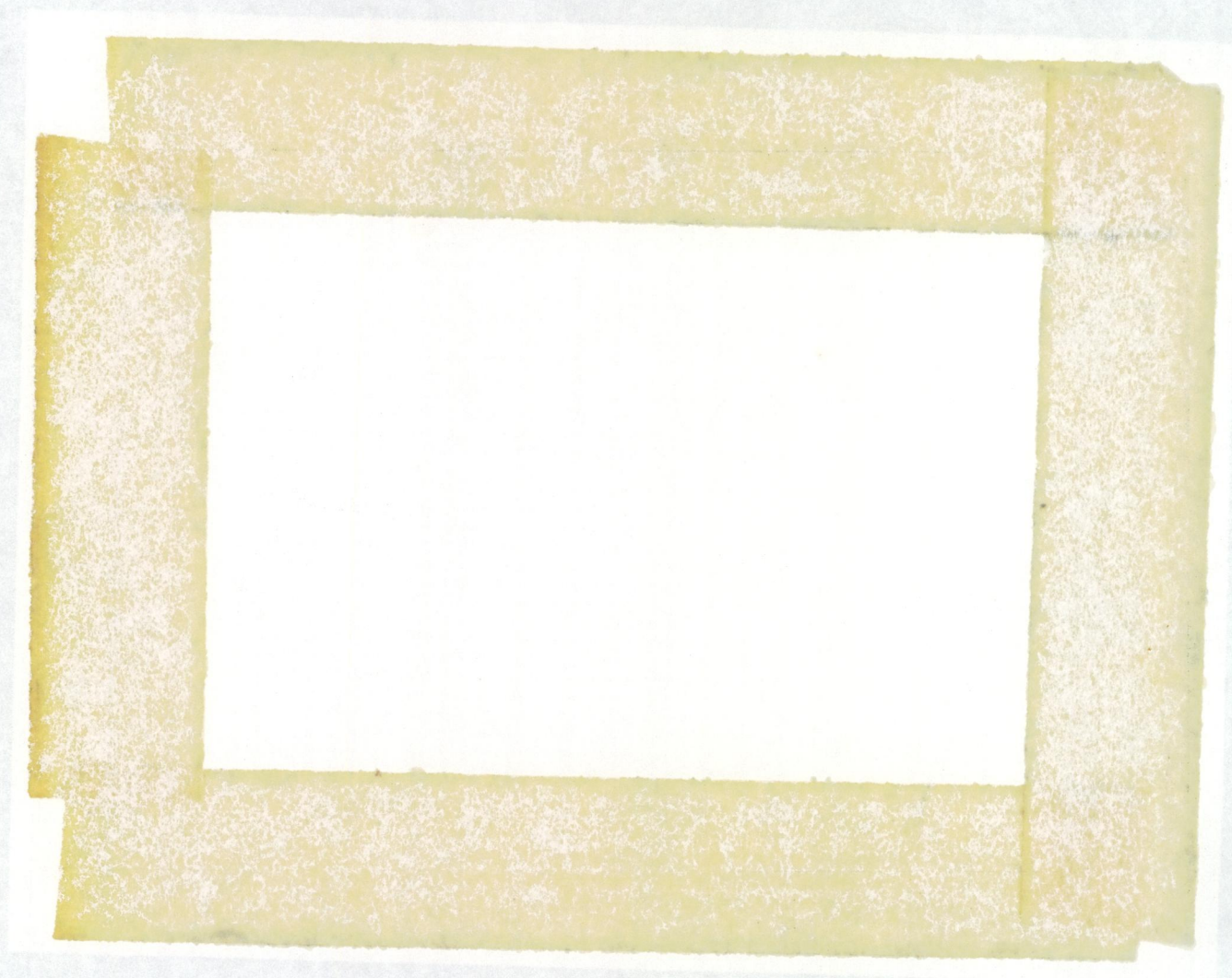






Figure 5 : Simone Mayre, *Figure of Dogs and Birds*





## **Chapter 3**

### **Art of the insane and the validity of Art Brut today**





"I do not regard elaborated ideas as the better part of the human function. They strike me as being a lesser degree of the mental process, a level on which the mental mechanisms are impoverished"(Glimcher, 1989, p.27)

According to Hanz Prinzhorn who wrote "*Bildnerei der Geisteskranken*" (*Artistry of the Mentally Ill*) in 1922, the same psychotic process can be found in art of the sane and insane artists. Therefore he said, there was no need to speak of "schizophrenic creativity" but simply of creativity. When Dubuffet discovered Prinzhorn's book his interest in art of schizophrenics and other people with mental illness was aroused. He came to share the ideas put forward by Prinzhorn and reiterated them in his own writings. Creativity as he saw it was not a privilege of the mad man or the genius, but a common phenomenon. This idea was based on the grounds that a judgement founded on whether the artist was sick or healthy was crude and impossible. Dubuffet saw mental illness as an additional asset to an artist. This was not a new idea by any standards, the Viennese artist Ernst Fuchs saw madness as the logical step to follow sanity which led to true intellect. Arnulf Rainer was also enthralled with the idea of madness and wrote of his studies of the "creative richness of schizophrenia". It was Rainer who also suggested that the art produced by insane people should be recognised as an autonomous culture, in fact he also proposed that the mad should be permitted to establish their own "Institute for Insane Culture". Rainer appeared to see schizophrenia not as an illness but as a more acute form of communication with the self.

However it has to be said that Dubuffet was more extensively involved with art of the insane than any other artist in this century. He championed the cause of those individuals whose activity as image makers



had been rejected and ignored by the guardians of culture. His interest in non-recognised art forms extended beyond art of the psychotic, to art of children and graffiti. He pointed out the importance of this distinct form of human expression. He prided himself in his celebration of the mundane, the overlooked, both in his writings and his art. He found that personal letters, notes from uneducated people, as he put it in the "Demagnitization of Brains" proved a more interesting read than the established great works of literature.

Next to the texts recommended by culture, these writings, in which the flavour and the accent and the raw expression remain free of any desire to be correct, will reveal that what culture considers to be good writing is precisely what should be avoided, as it is truly bad writing'.(Glimcher, 1989, P.100).

Similarly Francis Ponge said, "Words are ready made and express themselves; they do not express me. I stifle on them". (M.Thevoz, 1976, p.63).

In the final part of his book, Hans Prinzhorn's theories come very close to those of Dubuffet when he states that " a primal creative urge belongs to all human beings, but has been submerged by the development of civilisation". Psychosis was seen by both men as a fascinating element which enabled the creator to ignore culture and tune in directly to latent creativity.

But how do these non conventional ideas and aspirations hold up in today's society? Certainly now, and probably in Dubuffet's time people would not view insanity as an enviable state of mind. Art Brut has led to an enormous amount of research and study into previously unrecognised fields of art production, for this we must be thankful to Dubuffet and his contemporaries who realised their goal in awakening interest in such issues.

Carl Jung in the 1930's began to develop the idea outside the dominant moral christian world view with its conceptions of humanity and reality, there was a hidden but parallel conception of the nature of things which existed in alchemy. Dubuffet's views were somewhat similar, he insisted that there was and always had been a parallel "underground art" as well as the accepted art of the west. People's resistance to products of the unconscious went far deeper than Dubuffet realised. Freud noticed this, he





said that man's resistance to the forces within him and his hatred of himself were awakened in his dreams and his creativity. He also pointed out the immense demands that society places on individuals. Unlike Dubuffet however Freud remained optimistic on the side of civilisation. Dubuffet remained an outsider both in native society and in the one he created of psychotic and schizophrenic artists. He was untrained, as it were, in the skills of being an insane artist. It could even be said that in this respect he was infact a conventional artist, although many would disagree with that judgement also. The maker of 'Art Brut' is an amateur in the sense that he is untrained, he lives on the edge of society exiled as a madman, an eccentric, a criminal or a fool. Today's outsiders have expanded into broader groups on the outskirts of "civilised society"

In 1979 an exhibition of Outsider Art, (another name commonly used for Art Brut though not by Dubuffet), was held in London's South Bank Gallery. Roger Cardinal, always an avid supporter of Art Brut and Dubuffet wrote an opening essay for the catalogue of the show which was entitled "*Singular Visions*". It is interesting to note how Dubuffet's concepts have changed, or have been employed by various artists and organisations now dealing with art that is allied to Art Brut. The first thing one notices on reading the essay is that the types of people classified as Art Brut artists has changed. They are no longer patients in mental institutions, as they now have monitored art therapy sessions, which Dubuffet refused to recognise as valid. Today's Outsider can be practically anyone who feels that they do not quite fit in with the society system. This group encompasses everyone from criminals to the ordinary "man on the street". The people he describes as politically anarchical. Dubuffet's description tallies with Cardinal's updated version in that way. In order to be an outsider today one is still required to possess no official qualifications and to know nothing of fashions or trends. This pre-requisit seems unrealistic considering the vast difference in communication and education of this society in comparison with Dubuffet's 1940's one.

Cardinal also makes the point that the materials used in the production of Outsider Art would generally consist of materials like, roots,



hair, bread, trash etc., things which he claims a cultured artist would never use, except perhaps in a "coyly provocative way". This cannot be true of contemporary art, where surely every conceivable substance is being used in the production of art, to such an extent that it is even becoming difficult to find a piece of art which consists solely of conventional materials. The fact that most of the original Art Brut artists discovered by Dubuffet insisted on using materials like scrap paper and food was simply because in most cases that was all that was available to them in their respective mental institutions.

Realising that a psychotic state of mind is not readily obtainable to most people he claimed the desirous attitude was one of mental alertness. Rather than refusing to acknowledge the existence of culture one must instead strive to be against it. Van Gogh, although affected by mental disorder would not be an ideal individualist in Dubuffet's terms, as all he did was produce work which was accepted as part of the cultural system. Ironically Art Brut has itself become part of our cultural system. Maybe Dubuffet himself initiated this process by originally housing his collection in a recognised art gallery. This makes it hard to understand what Dubuffet's intentions really were. He claimed to be party to a philosophy of completely ignoring and turning away from cultural conventions yet on the other hand he didn't turn his back on the gallery system and the things associated with it. He became one of the people whom he decried in his various writings; one who judges artworks and selects some pieces while rejecting others. These were exactly the methods employed in the gathering of works for his collection.

In his writings he says that only what grows naturally and is spontaneously projected from within the psychic depths of the artists can be considered as valid, original creativity. Obviously the strongest candidates to abide by this strict regime were the insane, as Dubuffet saw it, madness was the ultimate refusal to conform.

What might be considered insensitive by today's society is that Dubuffet thought people overstressed the negative side of madness. For him insanity was not negative but positive. It was a healthy regenerative





contribution to human life. Consistent with this theory was his conclusion that many psychotics actually chose to be insane as a means of escaping from an arid social existence. Such was Dubuffet's faith in the mental strength of the insane artists, he argued that they knew perfectly well what they were doing. The work they created, was, in his opinion not to be explained as submission to unconscious dictation, although many of the artists involved, like Madge Gill for example, believed that they were being led by mediumistic/spiritual forces. Other artists like Peter Moog produced art believing this activity to be a form of penance for the crimes he committed. (Figure 6). There were artists like Adolf Wolfli, one of the most famous Art Brut artists, whose work was based around a hero image of himself and stories of his good deeds, perhaps another form of penance. (figure 7). Dubuffet's notion of just what exactly Art Brut was, proves to be a very rigid one. By his standards things like Art Therapy, Child Art, Naive Art, Folk Art etc are far removed from Art Brut, even Outsider Art it could be argued is not Art Brut by Dubuffet's reckoning. Roger Cardinal referred to these and other offsprings of Art Brut as "transitional zones", which arguably overlap at times with Art Brut, but only the original works in the official Art Brut collection can be said to be true Art Brut. This appears a rather foolish notion, to accept only the judgement of one man, namely Dubuffet, as being a distinguishing factor between Art Brut and non-Art Brut, especially seeing as society no longer provides us with the same sources for finding Art Brut as it did fifty years ago.

Dubuffet always insisted on personal definition and judgement being the solution to this problem of identifying Art Brut. Dating back to 1948 when the first show of psychiatric art was held in conjunction with the first world congress on psychiatry, he was requested not to lend to the exhibition which clashed with his own Art Brut show. He damned the exhibition, because he believed, work produced under diagnostic instruction from doctors was invalid. Thus the beginning of art therapy instruction for psychiatric patients did not meet with Dubuffet's approval. He made fair criticism of the techniques however, as by his standards art produced under



instruction is not the same as art produced by self motivation.

The differences between both forms could be as vast as they could be small, but the main difference has to be that on following art therapy instruction the artist is hardly making a gesture of non conformity. The process of making Art Brut and making art in therapy are different although even the art therapists are faced with the difficult task of distinguishing between stereotype and art and the problem of seeing through the cultural influences on the art produced.

Art Brut has also been associated with "Child Art". Even Dubuffet had an interest in the art of children. To some extent children might be considered to be unaffected by culture due to their age but unlike the Art Brut contributors, Dubuffet believed that children created for attention seeking purposes and this was contrary to the Art Brut doctrine. One thing they both have in common is neither has their source in works of the past. When children reach a certain age they inevitably fall prey to conventions in art and strive for accuracies or compliance with established standards. It may be assumed that the makers of Art Brut have somehow then escaped this later stage of development. They can therefore be seen to have a power to express whatever they choose in a manner which distinguished them from both children and adults.

"Normal Art", or maybe one could call it "Insider Art" has traditionally always reflected the society which created it. It has been said that twentieth century art reflects the individuals struggle against realities, like two World Wars and the various inventions and discoveries of this age due to the people like Freud and Einstein etc.

In the vacuum left by the rejection of the old belief structures, the subconscious workings of the psyche and the mystic spirituality are two concerns that have repeatedly engaged the attention of the professional artists - not to mention society at large"  
(G.Norman, 30th May 1993, p.21).

These concerns are expressed by those creators who are outside cultural convention or reasoning. Outsider Art has suddenly become in tune





with today. In 1992 an exhibition was held in a Los Angeles museum called "Parallel Visions", with the aim of marking the impact Art Brut has had on twentieth century art. The Outsiders were shown beside the professional artists they influenced. Artists like Baselitz and Penck among others have taken a significant interest in Art Brut. John Maizels, a British artist has started an international Outsider magazine called *Raw Art*, Michel Thevoz, curator of the Lausanne Collection, is still finding works of Art Brut in the margins of society. Anti-Art groups and non-conventional artists have become assimilated into the art industry. Graffiti art has gained respectability in the art circles and taken its place on gallery walls. The many different artists and groups of art makers which can now be placed in the umbrella of Outsider Art are numerous beyond our reckoning. Tim Rollins and the K.O.S., (Kids of Survival) provide a paradigm for the accepted Outsiders of today. Rollins works with a group of teenagers in the South Bronx area of New York. The group produce artworks in the "Art and Knowledge Workshop" where Rollins introduces his students to history, art and literature and uses these as a basis for producing art. Unlike Dubuffet, Rollins believes that in order to transform society, one needs to work from within the system. "The capitalist system is a total system, so to do anything you are going to have to play to all the rules a little bit, either that or you don't really want to win the game". (M.Daniel, 1988, p.9).

K.O.S. art has a dual function, firstly to educate the students in the traditions of art and literature and secondly to produce autonomous art objects which subvert and criticize the conventional expectations of the role of art in society. K.O.S. uses cultural history and art history as a tool to personalise their own opinions and political standpoints. Their goal is similar to that of Art Brut, unlike their methods. Art Brut has almost definitely become an institution. It is recognised today while in Dubuffet's time he couldn't even get financial support from the French Ministry of Culture to house the collection in France. So, is the apparent popularity/success of Art Brut a failure or a triumph in accordance with Dubuffet's ideals?

In his early fervour of anti cultural writings he appears to be against



any form of institutionalising art. In *Asphyxiating Culture* he stated that the only way of combating the Cultural Machine was to recognise it and be against it, to turn away from the methods of publication of work which leads to its acceptance by cultured people. The majority of people interested in Art Brut today and fifty years ago cannot be said to be un-cultured justifiably. Most of the interested parties are themselves from artistic backgrounds.

The Outsiders generally speaking, are found in a variety of places, rarely psychiatric clinics however. There is a market for Outsider today and this is as full of contradictions as the theories of Dubuffet. Scottie Wilson's work which he initially sold off in pairs and bargain prices in abandoned shops is now selling for thousands of pounds in London galleries. Many Outsiders are still reluctant to sell their work. There are some Outsiders, like Howard Finster for example who believe they are an instrument of God's message and make art accordingly. In

America there are a large number of "Folk Artists", as they are known, who could also fall into the category of Outsider artists.

But is Dubuffet's utopian aspiration of an a-cultural society, where clairvoyance is respected and intellectualism is seriously despised, a realistic notion, a genuine philosophy? These aspirations would point to the over throwing of all values and the advent of the common man, who conforms to nothing, and is fundamentally anarchistic. In Dubuffet's *Prospectus to Amateurs of Any Kind* he says, "There are no more great men and no more geniuses. And so we get rid of these evil-eyed dummies....We don't need geniuses any more than we need unicorns". (Glimcher, 1987, p.163)

On the contrary today's society is very much dependent on "geniuses" and unlikely to ever surrender intellect in favour of an idealised clairvoyance. In this respect his theories and doctrines are doomed never to come into fruition. On the other hand however despite the perhaps ironic culturalisation of Art Brut, it does have a strong following and has not ceased to attract individuals who are on the edge of society or at least who are interested in the creative output of those who are on the edge.





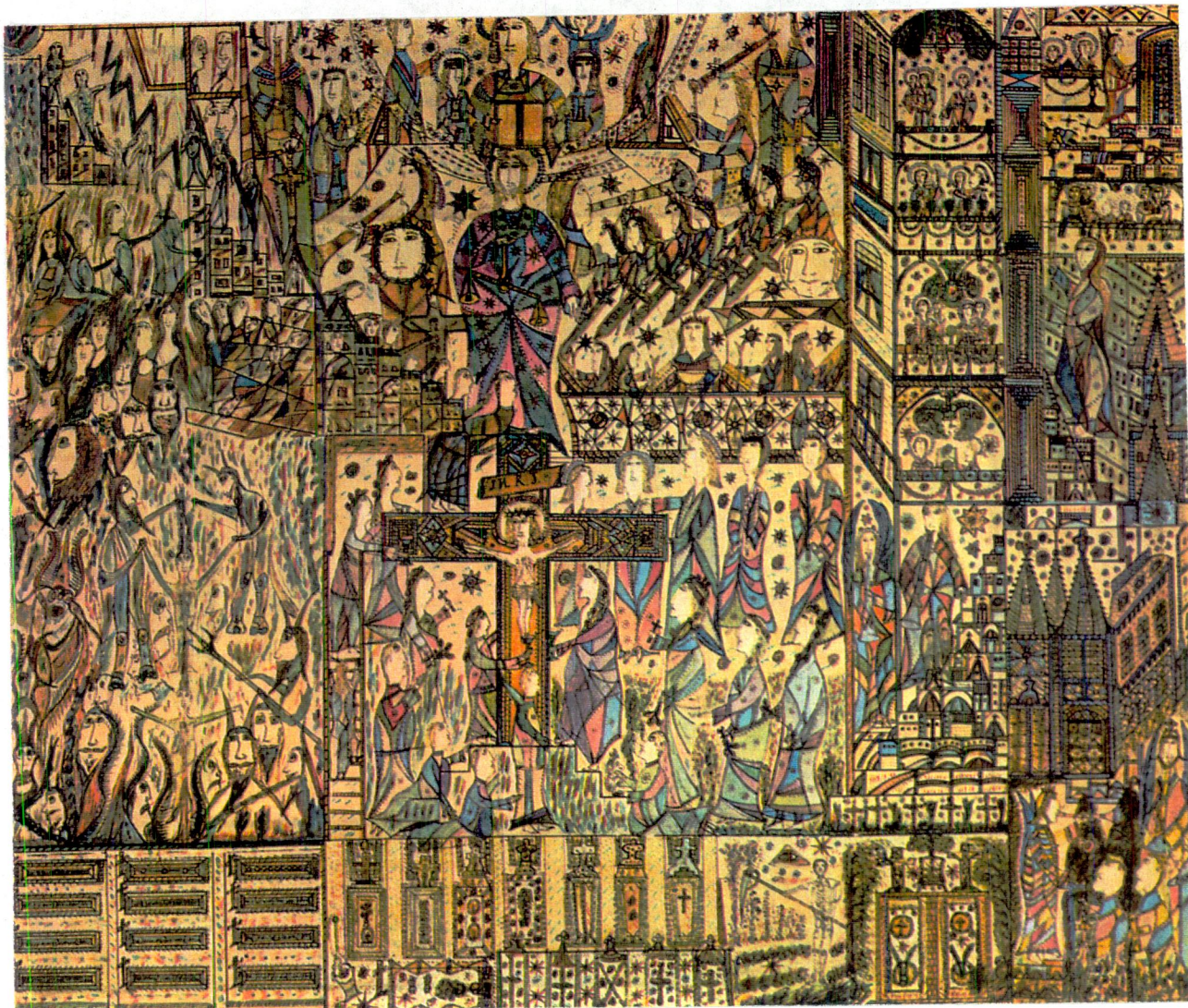


figure 6 : Peter Moog, *The Last Judgement*



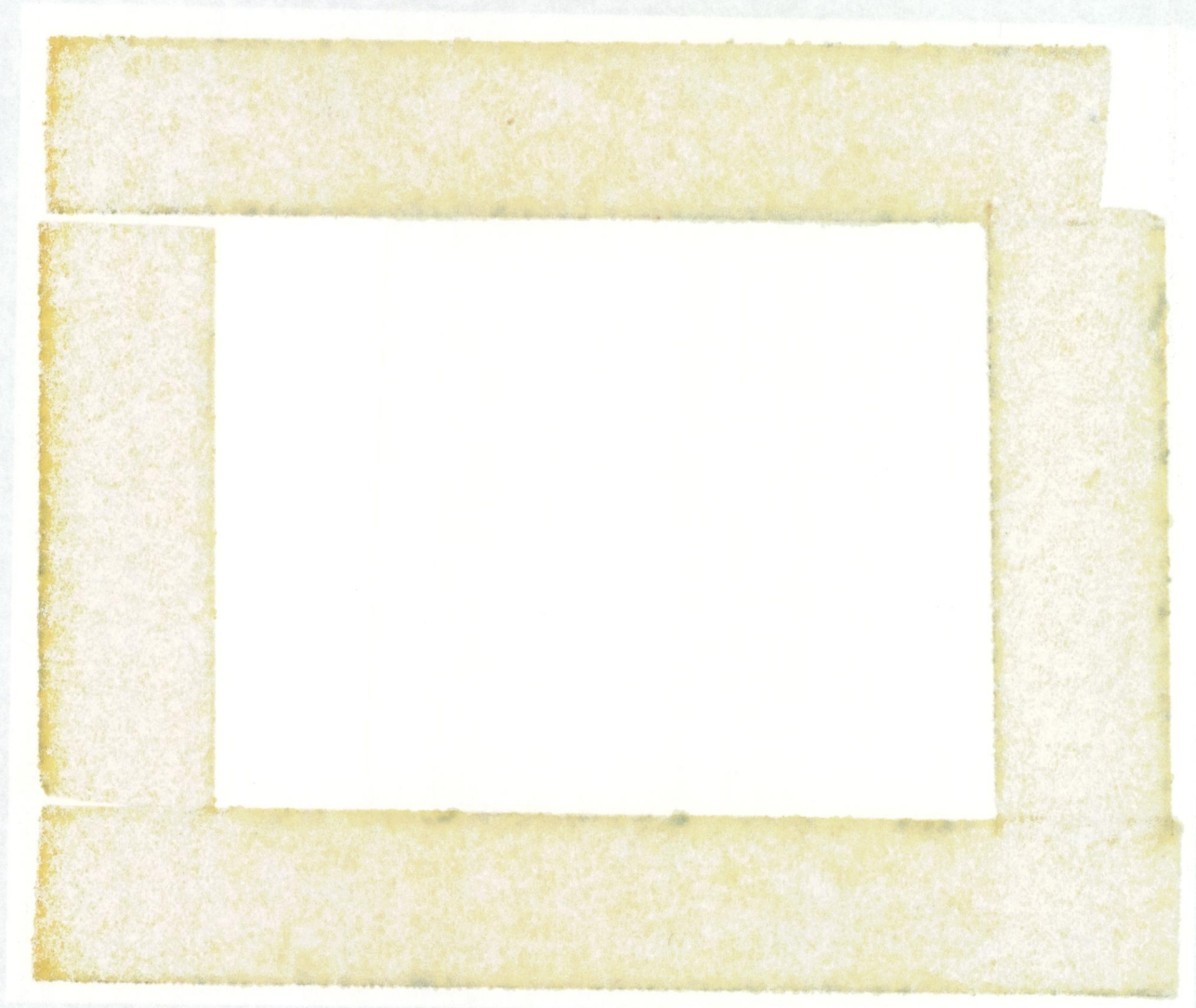
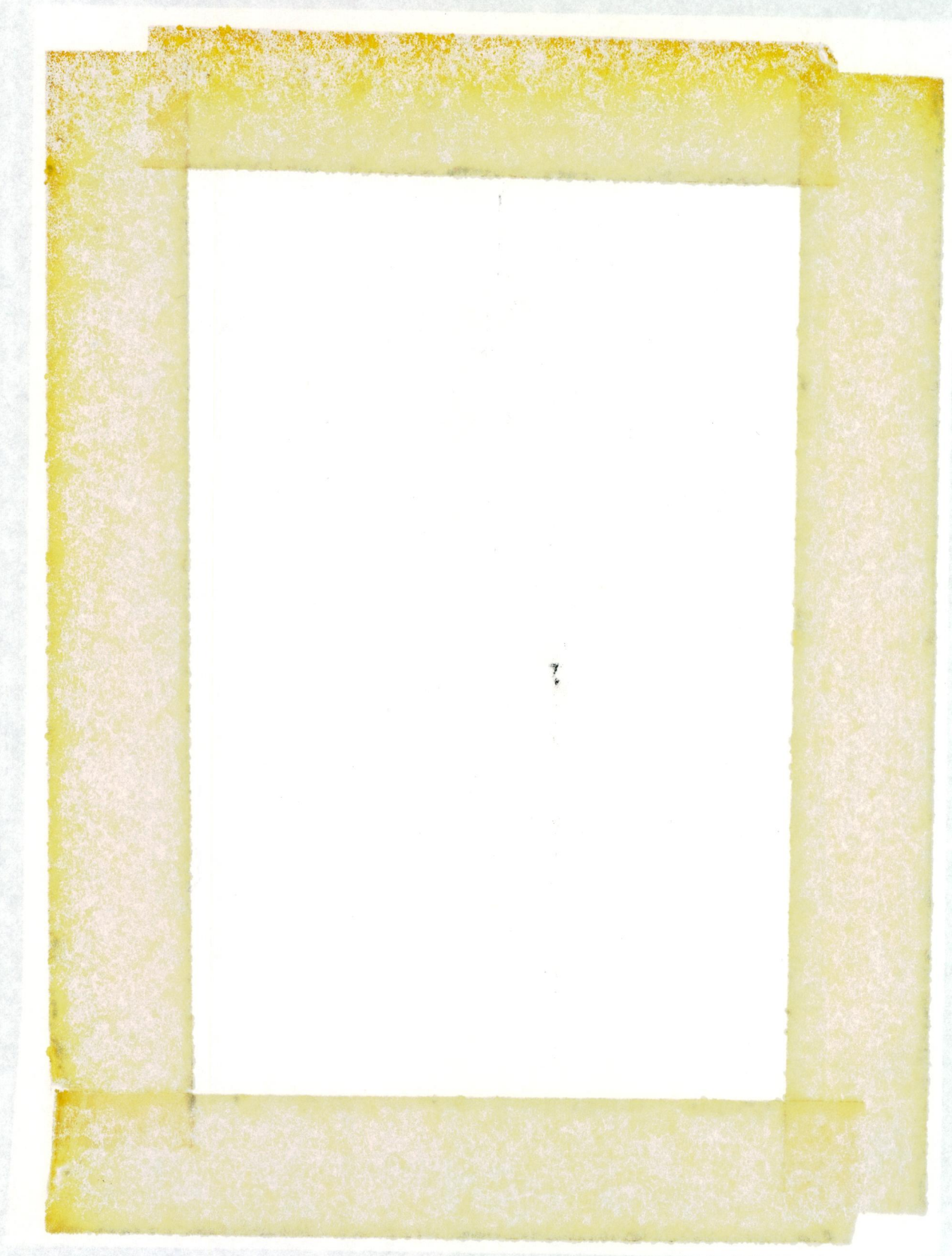






figure 7 : Adolphi Wolfi, *The Great Railroad of the Canyon of Angels*







## CONCLUSION

I don't wish to become more famous; nor do I desire to see the price of my pictures rise; I'm too busy with my work to be concerned with these things which seem quite useless (or even harmful) to me. I am indeed quite happy that my person and work remains in the shadows, a little secret and reserved for (the happy few)  
(Peppiatt and LLoyd, 1990, p.46-47)

Dubuffet wrote the above letter to James Fitzsimmons. In many ways it sums up his attitude towards his art production and his writing. The "happy few" are those fortunate enough to share Dubuffet's knowledge in and fascination for "Art Brut". The priority given to the inner world of the artist, and the rejection of the traditional rules of coherence, organisation and homogenisation in opposition to 'non-art' or reality were signposts to the future. As Ad Reinhardt said;

Tradition shows the artist what not to do  
'Reason' in art shows what art is not...  
The way to know is to forget'. (J.L.Ferrier, 1989, p.540)

Art Brut is undoubtedly more popular today than it was fifty years ago and who can say whether that is what Dubuffet would have wanted. The important thing is that Art Brut provided a place <sup>for art</sup> that was previously ignored, and in so doing opened up new avenues of exploration into art of the insane and Outsider Art. In today's society this is substantial. Dubuffet always stressed the importance of individualism and perhaps now more than ever this is tantamount to our being a truly civilised society. It is always the artists task to make us rethink our ideas of exactly what is art. Dubuffet's entire career as a writer can be seen as an attempt to liberate his readers from an artificial and irrelevant aesthetic. It is impossible to truly understand his reasoning as he was a product of an age completely different to ours. Although the ironies in some parts of the Art Brut tale as told by Dubuffet are questionable, I believe, on the whole, that he forced us to look at all kinds of man-made images, which were previously denied the title of art, and in so doing lessened the gap somewhat between art and society.



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