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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

DUBUFFET: (1942-1952)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PRINTMAKING

BY

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APRIL, 1985

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INTRODUCTION

Following the Allied landings of June 6th, 1944, and the Liberation of Paris in August, France faced a period of political and social uncertainty. The victory celebrations were soon forgotten as the population were faced with the problems of social instability and economic crisis. However, despite the difficult conditions, from the autumn of 1944 onwards, the arts in Paris started to flourish once again. In October, a major retrospective exhibition in honour of Picasso was held. His presence in Paris during the occupation was seen as a symbol of strength to other artists. During the Occupation he created such tragic and powerful images as the bronze skull "Le Crâne", 1943, and "Charnier" of 1945, which expressed the atrocities of the concentration camps. Picasso however was still a controversial figure, his famous "Tête de Taureau", 1943, a bull's head made from a bicycle saddle and handlebars was just one of the works that provoked violent reactions at the Salon de la Liberation in 1944. Picasso was certainly not alone however in his quest to challenge the public with new, anti-traditional images, the Galerie Rene Drouin's showing of Fautrier, Wols and Dubuffet, marked a definitive break with the past.

"I'm waiting for an art that's ungrateful, ugly, crude, as painful as giving birth, because it's a question of birth, not of games any longer, here as elsewhere".¹

The above quotation by the critic and gallery owner, Pierre Loeb, reflects the general mood of the French Avant Garde of the post-war period.

Jean Dubuffet contributed in no small way to the visual revolution, which occurred in Paris immediately following the war. In 1923, Dubuffet had discovered a book about the art of the mentally ill, Bildnerie der Geisteskranken,² 1922, by the Heidelberg psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn. This book had a lasting impression on Dubuffet and from that time on Dubuffet discovered and set about studying artworks produced in mental hospitals. He was soon convinced that such works are legitimate testimonies of human expression.

The post-war period in France witnessed a return to the values of the past and also a re-evaluation of cultural norms. This was undoubtedly heralded by an identity crisis felt by the French after the occupation. Andre Breton interpreted this re-evaluation as a break with the Graeco-Roman tradition of European culture which led to a celebration of primitive art in general,³ but in particular, that of a national origin. This interest in all things primitive, was not just a questioning of the origins of forms and techniques in painting, but moreover a questioning of the fundamental motivation behind the making of art, and a questioning of the effect of freedom, political and social, on the creativity of a people. It was against this general background that Dubuffet's interest in the art of the mentally

ill flourished. Madness could be interpreted as a primitive and indeed the psychiatrists and psychologists at the time, were investigating the possibility that the drawings of the mentally ill held "the secret of human expression and its formulations".⁴

Dubuffet bases his art on the premise that each living creature has a uniquely individual concept of reality, resulting in a belief that every individual's artistic creations should also be unique, and that true creativity results from an environment free from the constraints of traditional artistic values. All human beings have the power of imagination, our minds constantly absorb visual information which we take to be true reflections of reality, however each individual reacts in an entirely unique way to any given image. The way in which we react depends on our experience and knowledge of life in general. Furthermore the extent to which we are free to express creatively depends on to what degree we have been conditioned. If our conditioning has given us a set of "rules" by which we create, our creative energies have been seriously tampered with. Traditionally in western culture, the artist usually only gives a relatively small element of individuality to an image that society accepts as being representative. This limited use of imagination is challenged by Dubuffet. To imagine, in Dubuffet's eyes, is to "give image to", i.e. to imagine "worlds beyond our own limited experience".⁶ Dubuffet believed the artist must create images that are challenging to the eye, works of art that create facts and scenes replacing conventional representations.

Many of the traditional concepts of western art had been challenged in pre-war Europe, however even the pre-war modernists abided by set rules - use of perspective, balance of colour, balance of composition, etc. Dubuffet's aim is to "...violate the aesthetic postulates other people held inviolate in order to replace them with his own pictorial language, which draws to substance from non-academic sources, and, above all, from the imagination".⁵

This quest for a pure vision led Dubuffet to coin the term "Art Brut" - implying an art that is raw and crude, "brutal" in the sense of primal expression. In an essay entitled "L'art brut prefere aux arts culturels", Dubuffet defines art brut:

"We mean by this the works executed by people untouched by artistic culture, works in which imitation - contrary to what occurs among intellectuals - has little or no part, so that their makers derive everything (subjects, choice of materials used, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of patterning, etc.) from their own resources and not from the conventions of classic art or the art that happens to be fashionable. Here we find art at its purest and crudest; we see it being wholly reinvented at every stage of the operation by its maker, acting entirely on his own. This, then, is art springing solely from its makers knack of invention and not, as always in cultural art, from his power of aping others or changing like a chameleon".⁶

The essential elements of Art Brut can be broken down to three characteristics; one, the makers of Art Brut are socially or mentally outside of societies accepted definitions of the norm; two, their work is conceived and produced outside the field of "Fine Arts", i.e., without the constraints of gallery manipulation and art school teaching, it is also conceived with little or no regard for the recipients of the work; three, the subjects, techniques and systems of figuration have little connection with traditional or fashionable interpretations of same.

Dubuffet strove to reject anything and everything academic, to reject all criteria based on traditional aesthetic values. I believe Dubuffet's main achievement in his quest for a "new art" was technical. Dubuffet's subjects and systems of figuration could in themselves be seen as contrived versions of cultural art or perhaps an imitation of the art of the insane. Dubuffet's position was altogether tenuous. On the one hand he places Art Brut on a pedestal, a true art untainted by intellectual reasoning, yet on the other hand he was making art that was obviously cultural, his theories and discoveries were addressed to the cultural art world of the time so he was in constant danger of contradicting himself. However, Dubuffet was well aware of his position, yet decided to react within the confines of the established art world, feign allegiance to the system and question convention from its core. Dubuffet's allegiance with the art system and the subsequent housing of Art Brut in a museum

could be seen as a major compromise, undermining the Art Brut ideal. However to adopt such a cynical approach would be denying the positive and revolutionary effect Dubuffet had on the art establishments (and ultimately the public's) way of seeing and evaluating art.

Dubuffet returned to painting in 1942, yet did not publish his essay "L'art brut prerere aux art culturels"⁶ until 1949. It is the period 1942 - 1952 (circa) that I will deal with in this thesis, it is the period of Dubuffet's career which shows greatest development of technique, ideas and style. If Dubuffet had ceased to create in the mid 50's, his essential effect and influence on contemporary art would still have been monumental. By studying the works of Dubuffet produced in this period alone, one can uncover the essence of Dubuffet, the intellectual, the artist, the man.

"My system depends in fact upon the identical character of all men; for me there is only a single man in the universe, whose name is Man, and if all painters signed their works by this name, "picture painted by a man", see how pointless any questioning would appear". Dubuffet⁷

FOOTNOTES - INTRODUCTION

1. Pierre Loeb, "Regards sur la peinture", Librairie Galerie la Hune, Paris, 1950.
2. Hans Prinzhorn, Bildnerei der Geisteskranken, Springer, Berlin, 1923; reprinted 1968. Artistry of the mentally ill. Berlin and New York, 1971.
3. Andre Breton, Present des Gaules, Gallimard, Paris 1965, P.333 referred to on p. 15 of "Aftermath", Trefoil Books Ltd 1982 - (catalogue).
4. Henry-Claude Cousseau, Aftermath p. 15 Trefoil Books Ltd 1982.
5. Andreas Franzke, Dubuffet p. 10, Harry N. Abrams inc. New York 1981.
6. Jean Dubuffet "Prospectus et tous ecrits suivants, Gallimard Paris 1967, p. 82. (This book reprints essay l'art brut prefere aux arts culturels 1949).
7. Ibid. p. 84.

CHAPTER__1

DUBUFFET'S EARLY WORKS 1942 - 1945

From about 1920 to 1942, Dubuffet had only painted sporadically. When he began painting again in 1942, at first it was with no professional ambitions and mostly for his own pleasure. At this time, although interested in the art of the mentally ill and all marginal art, Dubuffet had no intellectual or psychological reasoning behind his own return to art. Although his early works show a general approach already breaking with traditional practice, in technique and treatment of paint Dubuffet's intentions were basically conformist.

The earliest works comprise of still-lives, nudes and portraits, straightforward representational images, painted in oils and gouache and showing little if no evidence of the exploration of materials or characteristics of his later work. Dubuffet's gouache painting of March 1943 "Metro" is a good example of his earliest work. The painting is more akin to illustration, with the cartoon like figures painted in bright pastel colours. The paintings only evidence of unconventionality is possibly the flesh colours used, i.e. blue, olive green, bright red and lilac, but this device too recalls the fauvist tradition. Dubuffet's use of black, outlining areas of flat pure colour, characteristic of his current work is evident in his early gouaches. This simplistic style did not last long however, in technique and





2 - "LARGE COALY NUDE", 1944

treatment of paint they do not have the personal conviction evident only a year later.

In August 1944, Dubuffet completed "large coaly nude". In this painting, the artist evidently attacked the canvass with great energy, the image is clearly representational and Dubuffet uses the familiar black unbroken outline, rendering the figure quite motionless, however it is not the figure that immediately strikes one, but Dubuffet's use of paint and colour. One's initial impression suggests a limited colour range of browns, blues and pinks, however on closer inspection there is evidence of an underpainting of bright yellows, greens and reds. What movement and energy the painting possess is suggested not by the figure, which is quite still, but by the use of paint and brush stroke.

Dubuffet's progression is most evident when one compares the three paintings - "Metro" 1943, "Rope Skipper" 1943 and "Large coaly nude" 1944.

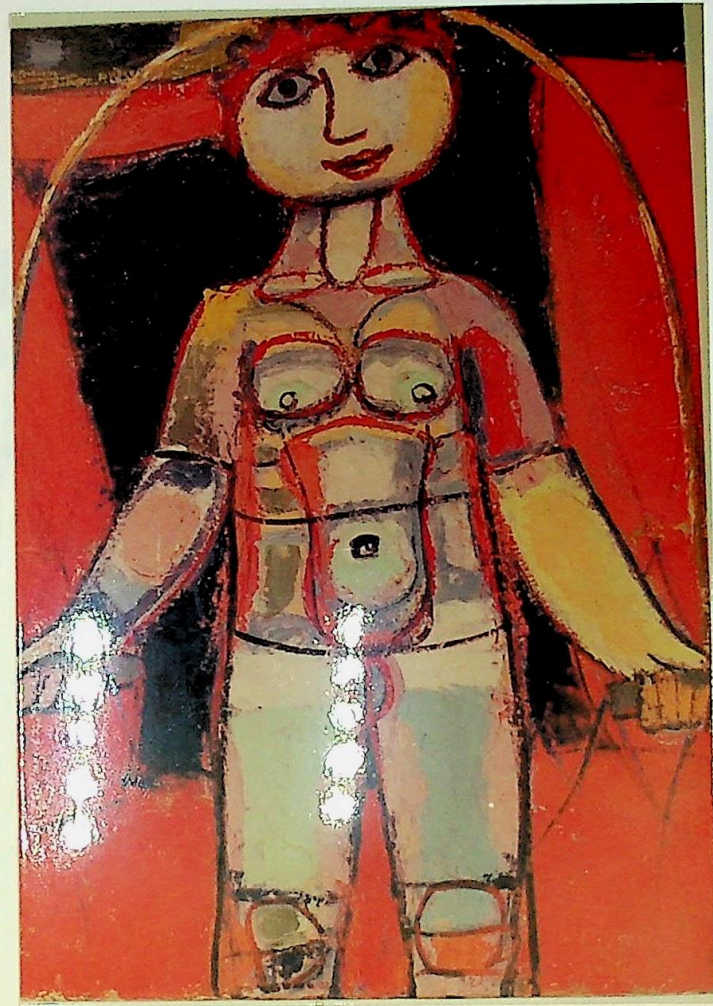
In "Rope Skipper", glaring coloured paint was laid on in fauvist style and thereby took on a value of its own, which set the tone for the picture as a whole. Our attention is directed to the painting process as such and away from the particular theme of the girl skipping. The artist has become involved, almost completely with the process, the image taking on a secondary role. There is a striking contrast between the development of technique and the almost identical drawing style of the two

female nudes. Dubuffet's rejection of perspective is apparent in the nude paintings, while in "Metro" he uses aerial and linear perspective quite blatantly. The painting "Large coaly nude" has been depicted in texts as an example of Dubuffet's anti-establishment views. The association of coal and dirt with the female nude apparently being a deliberate slap in the face of academic traditional aesthetic values. I feel that the association is less deliberate than that, even the evidence of the aforementioned progression illustrates Dubuffet's primary interest in technique.

"Marionettes de la Ville et de la campagne" is the heading under which Andreas Franzke groups Dubuffet's early works in his book "Dubuffet".¹ This categorization is a clear indication of Dubuffet's intended use of the figure in his early work. The figures clearly have no particular characterisations to distinguish them from each other, they are entirely anonymous.

"A fantasy Paris, its house fronts and squares make a gaudy stage setting for passersby and dogs who, marionette-like,² perform grotesque comedies before the viewer".

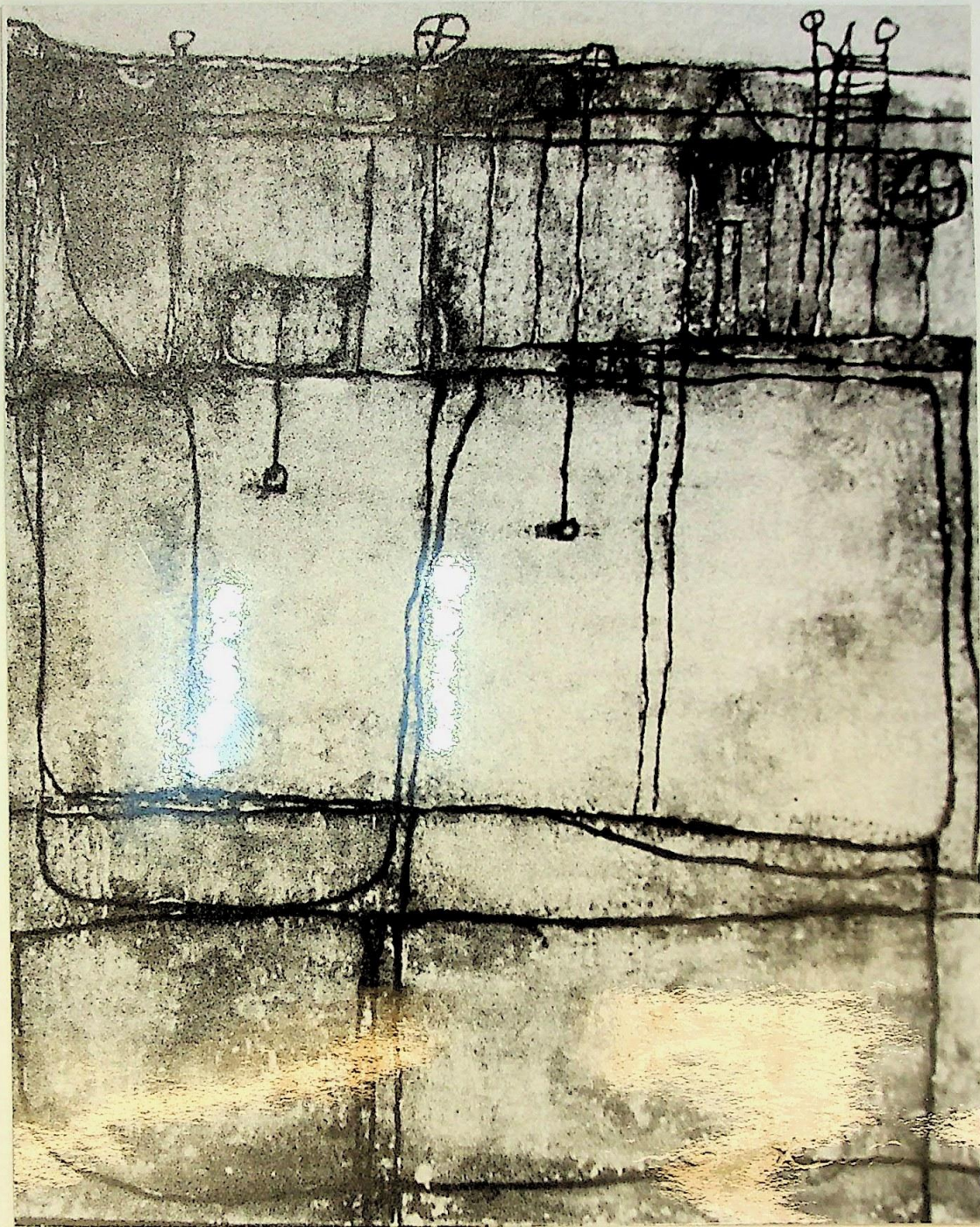
This use of the figure grew out of Dubuffet's earlier hobby, puppet making. None of these marionettes have survived but it is interesting that as early as 1932 Dubuffet was "inventing" characters in the form of marionettes as opposed to representing known personalities. Dubuffet was not solely concerned with the figure however and from 1943 Dubuffet showed an interest in



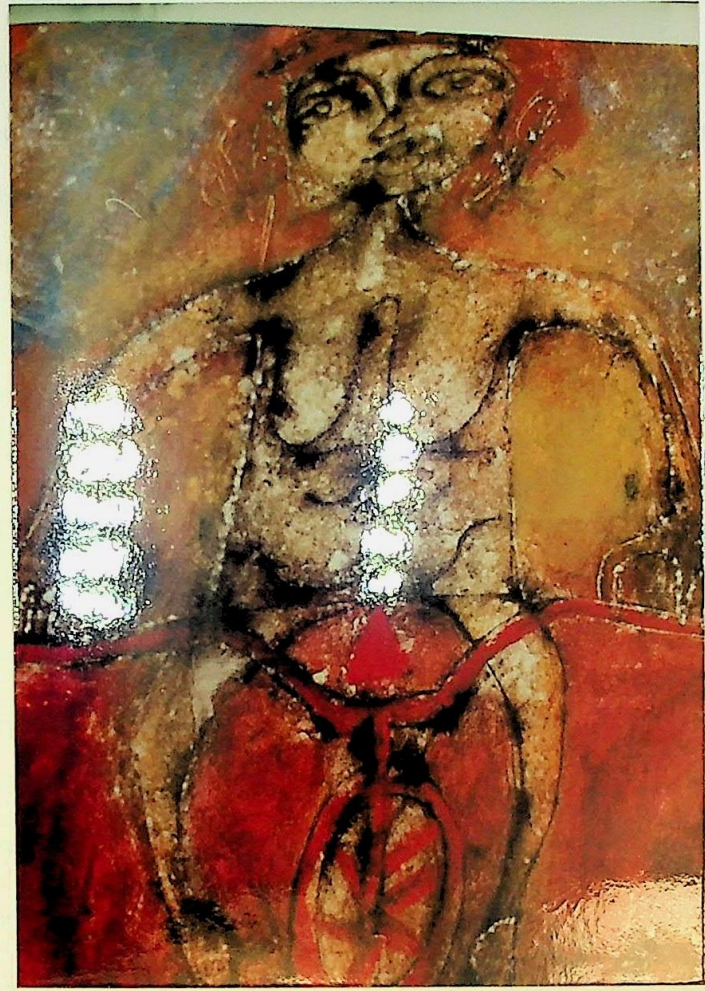
3 - "ROPE SKIPPER", 1943



4 - "CYCLIST IN THE FIELDS", 1943



5 - "QUIET COUNTRYSIDE", 1944
- 17 -



6 - "NUDE CYCLIST", 1944

landscape painting.

In July 1943, the Dubuffets went on a cycling trip to Villefranche-sur-Saône. Dubuffet made many sketches and paintings on this trip, and again the contrast between these and later landscapes is quite stark. Compare "Cyclist in the fields", 1943 with "Quiet countryside", 1944 and one can see yet again how Dubuffet's preoccupations changed. The former is illustrative and almost fauvist in colour use, while the latter emphasises the tactile qualities of the earth. There are however some obvious ties, perspective is suggested in both by the use of a highly positioned horizon line, and the use of black line, while more refined in the latter is still essentially illustrative. Dubuffet continued to suggest an horizon, however unconsciously until 1945. In "Large coaly nude" and "Nude cyclist" 1944, the horizon is suggested by the positioning of the figures hands.

Dubuffet's use of the "marionette" varied considerably during his early period. In the painting "Quiet countryside", the artist successfully omits the figure, concentrating his energies on the evocation of earth. Dubuffet's use of line is used to convey field boundaries, geometric trees and an equally geometric house. Compare this to "Jazz band" executed only three months later in which the subject seems to be all important. While the figures still suggest marionettes they are no longer isolated but relate to one another in the manner essential to all musical groups.

Development of technique

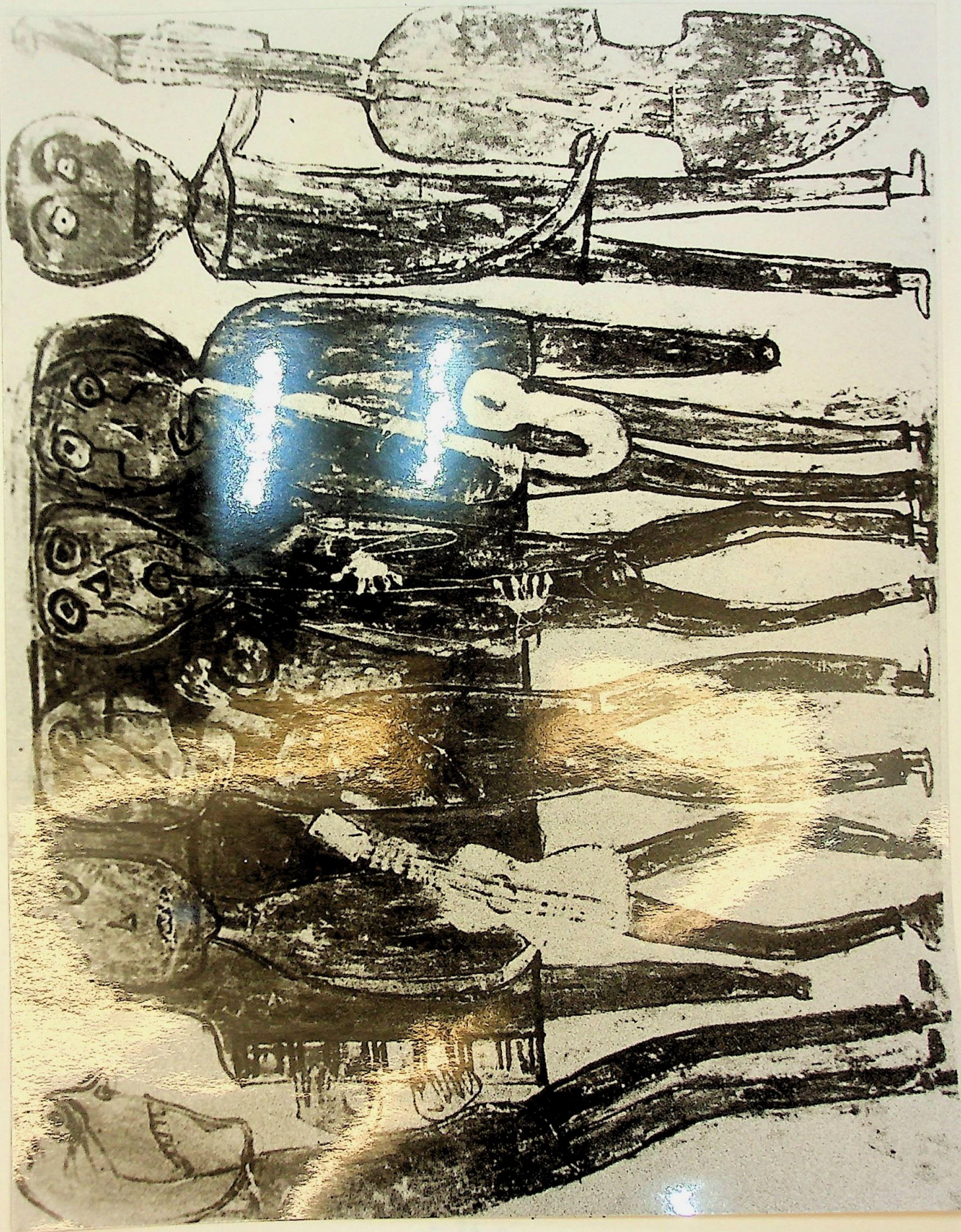
"It is true that in my triturations of materials, and manners of applying them, I found myself led to allusions which most often pointed not toward so-called noble materials such as marble or fine marquetry woods but to very common everyday stuff of no value like coal, asphalt, or even mud, towards the accidental effects of rain wearing away different kinds of the commonest soils or of the decay with age of things that are themselves of the crudest sort such as old scrap iron, rough-cast walls, and every kind of junk and whatever pertains to trash and refuse"³

By 1945 Dubuffet was painting in what he called his "Haute pâte" style, a heavy mixture of thick paint and sand, plaster, coal dust and the like to which he often added such materials as string and broken glass. This emphasis on materials was now combined with a more obvious consideration of the subject matter. In the painting "Archetypes" (May 1945), Dubuffet first lays on the canvas a ground of "Haute pâte" into which the artist draws his figures. The nudes, one male and one female, are essentially of his familiar, anonymous, graffiti type, however because Dubuffet has clearly treated the drawing with equal conviction as he has the "pâte", they take on a more animate and important role. Although the drawing style has changed little from his earlier nudes of 1944, they are clearly far less incidental. This marriage of line and surface is further successfully explored in "Fossilised speechifier", 1944. Here the outline is

less apparent, being no more than a track mark through the pâte created by the dragging of a brush-like object across the surface of the pâte rather than through it. The coal dust and coarse substances mixed into the paint create an impression of rock like substance while the outlining marks are lightly carved in the manner of a fossil. Again Dubuffet's treatment of the figure as an anonymous image is emphasised by the reference to fossilization, i.e. not only could the figure be of any geographical location but of any time in history.

Dubuffet exhibited the aforementioned works at the "Galerie Rene Drouin" in 1946, his first public show. Not all of the works in this show used "haute pâte" in its crudest sense. Dubuffet sometimes simulated the technique by using an extremely thick impasto of pure oil paint, or he built up and/or scraped down his canvasses in an effort to achieve the same effect as "haute pâte". In his show Dubuffet also exhibited a number of landscapes of which "Landscape with moon and bird" is the most conspicuous. Once again Dubuffet returns to his use of line and in his use of paint and colour the painting is almost an exercise in pattern making. The use of geometric line in his urban works and landscapes had been evident since his landscapes of 1944 ("Quiet countryside"), however the geometric use of paint work and colour as a ground onto which the drawing is placed is entirely new. Hitherto, Dubuffet had used the paint to evoke a tactile rendition of the surface material he was representing.

In "Landscape with moon and bird" however, Dubuffet's concern appears to be with the effect of moonlight on the landscape and how he can best evoke this with colour. Rather than to imply an inconsistency of style on the part of Dubuffet, this brief departure is moreover a further attempt by Dubuffet to solve the conflict sometimes evident between line, colour and texture within his own work. Dubuffet's development is quite logical as far as technique is concerned, however one gets the feeling that he was not entirely happy with the figurative element of his work, this he tackled the following year when he made a series of "portraits" of his friends.





7 - "JAZZBAND", 1944



8 - "ARCHETYPES", 1945



9 - "FOSSILISED SPEECHIFIER", 1944
- 25 -



10 - "LANDSCAPE WITH MOON AND BIRD", 1944
- 26 -

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 1

1. Andreas Franzke, Dubuffet, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York 1981.
2. Ibid p. 22.
3. Jean Dubuffet, Prospectus et toutes ecrits suivant, Gallimard, 1967, p. 65 - 66.

CHAPTER 2

In July 1945, Dubuffet began a series of portraits. In the first 20 - 25 or so studies he used Jean Paulhan as his subject. It was an important exercise in the development of the artist's work. Dubuffet had at this time become technically confident; he had mastered the Haute Pâte technique and had evidently arrived at a crossroads from whence he had to decide on the future direction of his work. While his technique was consistently competent, his imagery often appeared weak and lacking in conviction. By dealing with the figure, and in particular by using a close friend as subject, Dubuffet forced himself to re-evaluate his way of interpreting form.

"for a portrait to go really smoothly for me it has to be scarcely a portrait. At the very least, to be a portrait no longer. It is then that it starts functioning full strength. I have a great love for things carried to their extreme possible limit".¹

In his portrait of Jean Paulhan, (July 1945) Dubuffet blatantly strives to capture a likeness rather like some of his earlier figurative work. It is a caricature in as much as he deliberately exaggerates the features; elongated nose; closely set eyes, etc. The portrait, tentative in execution and decidedly overworked, is a poor indication of Dubuffet's figurative abilities. Dubuffet undoubtedly recognised this but strove on regardless in pursuence of a satisfactory result. The technical procedures developed

previously were retained, though modified to complement his theme. He continued to use the Haute Pâte technique, and experimented with line. Dubuffet began to employ crayon in his drawing which produced a rough line similar to the track-marks of his earlier paintings, the artist also used a technique whereby he first laid down a ground of coloured ink and crayon, over which he painted a layer of black indian ink, he then scratched through the ink exposing the underlying colour. Dubuffet also worked in pure black and white, again scratching through the black surface revealing the white ground. This produced an interesting negative effect as can be seen in "Leautaud griffures blanches" and "Micheaux griffures blanches". Evidently Dubuffet had moved away from conscious recognisable images of his friends, however by stating that his drawings were portraits of identifiable people, they were no longer representations of anonymous beings but images of his friends as he saw them. Dubuffet strove to evoke the individual rather than represent him. Dubuffet aimed for an anti-portrait image, an idea of portraiture totally opposed to the tradition of academy portraiture. It is difficult in retrospect to evaluate this series of portraits. His portraits, while strikingly anti-establishment, were hardly entirely original. There existed numerous other French artists, Dubuffet's contemporaries, who were similarly looking for new solutions to the old problem of portraiture, i.e. is it possible to successfully capture an image of a complex personality on canvass, and if so how best can it be done? Gaston Chaissac, Roger Bissiere, Antonin Artaud, Jean

Michel Atlan and numerous anonymous artists (often with histories of mental disorder) were dealing with alternative portraiture at that time.

Bissiere exhibited at the Rene Drouin gallery in 1947 and his figurative images are very similar to those by Dubuffet. Antonin Artaud introduced text into his portraits paying deliberate homage to his literary background.

Artaud's interest in portraiture grew from his habit of "doodling" in the margins of his manuscripts, just as he allowed his art to overflow onto his text, he allowed language to overflow onto his art. The relationship between his drawings and his writings is similar to that of his literary predecessor, Victor Hugo, who prophesied Art Brut when in 1862 he wrote to his publisher, Castel:

"Chance has brought to your notice a few attempts at drawing made by me in hours of almost unconscious daydreaming with the ink left in my pen on the margins or covers of manuscripts....I very much fear that these nondescript pen strokes set down on paper more or less awkwardly by a fellow who has other things to do may cease to be drawings from the moment they claim to be such".³

While Hugo subconsciously created in an idealised interpretation of Art Brut, Artaud was conscious of the brutish element within his work. In 1947 Artaud prefaced his exhibition "Portraits et

dessins" at the gallery Loeb with the following words:-

"...The human face is an empty force, a field of death...the human face bears in effect a kind of perpetual death on its countenance. It is precisely up to the painter to save this face by restoring its personal features..."⁴

Dubuffet's portraits however lack this conviction, sometimes even his loose portraits appear derivative. Artaud and Chaissac were not trained in fine arts, Dubuffet was, therefore he could not attain the same spontaneous or Brut quality evident in the work of many of his contemporaries.

Dubuffet's treatment of composition changed little throughout his portrait series, the aforementioned portrait "Portrait of Jean Paulhan" is traditional in its setting, the figure is painted in a head and shoulder pose, set squarely on the canvass. Details such as the white shirt and the black tie and neatly trimmed moustache indicate the sitters privileged position in society (- is this an anti-portrait ?). In the later portraits however, Dubuffet dispenses with such trivial detail and the portraits come nearer to being anti-portraits. The subjects are all privileged society members being mostly artists, writers and philisophers but no indication of this is given. The figures continue to be placed squarely on the canvass, perhaps in itself indicating that the drawing is a portrait rather than an anonymous figure. In the portraits of 1945 there is little sense of movement or activity within the painting, however as the



11 - "PORTRAIT OF JEAN PAULHAN", 1945



12 - "LEAUTAUD GRIFFURES BLANCHES"




13 - "MICHAUX GRIFFURES BLANCHES"



14 - "LA VENUE NOIRE", 1945



15 - "JOE BOUSQUET IN BED", 1947



portraits developed, so too did a sense of personality within the picture. Compare the "Portrait of Jean Paulhan" executed in 1945 and "Joe Bousquet in Bed" of 1947. For the latter painting there exists two preparatory gouaches depicting the bedridden author. Dubuffet returns to indicative details and the painting is almost narrative in style. Dubuffet had abandoned detail for a period in 1946 during which time he executed a number of portraits, concentrating on the quality of line and introducing a deliberate sense of movement (see Leautaud white scratchings). In "Joe Bousquet in Bed" Dubuffet achieves a striking balance between line and technique. The line appears controlled yet not overly contrived as in his earlier "caracatures". The sitters gesticulations, combined with bed-tray of letters and books, indicate more the sitters mental agility than social status. The linear spontaneity is far removed from the geometric patterns employed in his earlier paintings. This successful marriage of line and technique is echoed in the painting "Antonin Artaud with tufted hair", here the artist covered almost the entire surface of his thickly-laid-on ground colour with ashes and in some spots with sand or coal dust. The rough overall impression is paralleled by the drawings inside the figure. As in the crayon drawings of the same period, the artist uses seemingly naive and clumsy line to outline the "data" and at the same time he creates negative areas which he treats with equal technical importance as the positive background. The impact however is one of high visual contrast, the figure stands out from the background emphasising the figure's importance as a personality.

Dubuffet's achievements at this time, again appear to be technical. While he succeeded in developing his competence with line and composition, I am not sure he was successful in his quest for anti-portraiture as such. His portraits were certainly innovative and different, but they were not sufficiently anarchaical to change the face of C20th portraiture !

As a figurative artist however Dubuffet's innovative techniques made for a special individualism which did not go unnoticed. Undoubtedly because of his interest during 1946-47 in portraiture, Dubuffet's relationship with the figurative element in his work became more assured as can be clearly seen in his work of the following year, 1948. Apart from the natural development of the figure, Dubuffet's style was greatly influenced by a trip to the Algerian oasis of El Golea, made during the months of February, March and April 1947.

This trip allowed Dubuffet to assess his work, and art in general from a non-western cultural standpoint. This visit to Africa, prompted in part by the harsh winter and fuel shortages in England at the time, was followed later by two returns to the dessert, from November 1947 to April 1948, and from March to May of 1949.

Dessert Influences

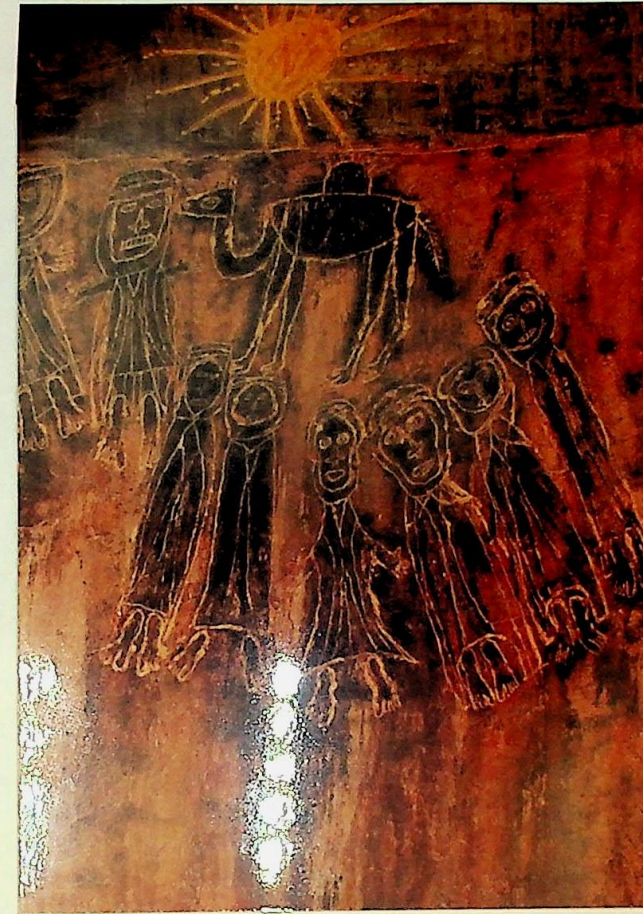
The limitations imposed by life in the dessert, gave rise to

Dubuffet's experimentation with gouache. Dubuffet was used to the manipulative qualities of oil and other slow drying media, however the artist discovered that by mixing gum-arabic with the gouache it made it more pliant, it also extended the covering power of the gouache which was of vital importance, as access to any painting material was difficult. The gum-arabic gave a transparent quality to the gouache unlike any material used by Dubuffet before. However this mixture could be laid on canvass/paper in an impasto manner adding a new dimension to Dubuffet's work. In the painting "Musicians in the dessert" executed at the end of '47, the artist shows great control of a difficult and alien medium. The composition has changed little from his early landscapes, the high horizon now being a characteristic of Dubuffet's work. The use of colour is highly evocative of the dessert setting, neutral shades of sand and scattered areas of bright oranges, complement the underlying blue, used also to depict the sky in a long band of heavy impasto. Dubuffet has scratched through the sand areas, often allowing the line to change freely in colour from orange/brown to deep blue. The crusty paint surface is brittle and appears to have broken arbitrarily while Dubuffet was drawing into it. The most striking aspect of this painting however is the drawing. The deliberate line merges with areas of accidental cracking. This is far removed from the portrait images in which the figure tended to contrast strongly with the background, here the drawing and setting are as one. The dessert oasis appears to be a hive of activity, intentional or not it creates a perfect setting for



16 - "ARTAUD WITH TUFTED HAIR"
- 40 -










20 - "WINEY LANDSCAPE", 1944
- 44 -



these two highly animate musicians. The musicians hands are employed playing their instruments, yet there is a definite sense of gesticulation. Compare this painting with the earlier painting "Jazz band" 1944. A similar theme perhaps, but how much more musical the more recent painting is ! Dubuffet again employs an element of pattern making, particularly in the bottom right hand corner. However the overall effect of pattern was achieved accidentally rather than deliberately due to the aforementioned brittleness of the paint surface.

Between the first and second trips to the Sahara, Dubuffet produced nine oil paintings, of which six reflect themes connected with the first visit, an obvious inconsistency of linear quality is evident when one compares "They hold council", April 1947 with the earlier "Musicians in the desert", the drawing in the former is stiff, movement is almost non-existent, and the figures are isolated in such a way as to give little feeling of verbal or non-verbal interaction. Their positioning is certainly suggestive of ceremony, however any atmosphere evoked is achieved by colour use, the feeling of heat being evoked by the prominent positioning of the sun and by its vibrant colouring.

"The Sunny Sundays", painted shortly afterwards has a similar quality. Dubuffet has returned to deliberate pattern making, geometric linear elements dominating the scene, reminiscent of his painting "Winey Landscape" of 1944.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 2

1. Jean Dubuffet, Prospectus et toutes écrits suivants, Gallimard, Paris, 1967 p.p. 65 -66.
2. This point is dealt with in Aftermath p.22. Trefoil Books Ltd, 1982.
3. Picon, Vitor Hugo dessinateur, la Guilde du Louvre, Lausanne 1963.
4. Antonin Artaud, Portraits et Dessins, Galerie Pierre Loeb, June 1947

CHAPTER 3

Dubuffet continued to work on the Sahara theme until 1950, however, during a last visit to the oasis of Beni-Abbes in the spring of 1949, Dubuffet drew landscapes that only very generally reflect his personal experience of the region. Using his store of visual knowledge and experience, Dubuffet began to be more inventive with his subject matter. As in the portraits, the artist was aiming to create allegories, with a life of their own. In the painting "Figure in a country", 1949, there is little direct reference to Dubuffet's surroundings. There is some reference to desert huts and palm trees in the drawing, however there is no general feeling of "desert" as in the earlier "Musicians in the desert" of the end of '47. There is little or no evocation of heat in the former, the sun, in its familiar dominating position is shielded by what could be a cloud. In composition the painting is similar to many of the artist's landscapes; high horizon, blue sky, dominating position of sun, are all motifs we are familiar with. The drawing of the figure however has evolved, the highly stylised profile of the figure is almost decorative in approach, the exaggerated mass of the head is reminiscent of Dubuffet's earlier portrait series. At this time the artist had begun to execute numerous pen and ink drawings, and undoubtedly the fluidity of line produced with pen and ink inspired the fluid, exaggerated profile of "figure in a country site".

In December 1949, for his first European exhibition outside of Paris, at the Galerie de Diable in Brussels, Dubuffet lithographed a poster and a four page catalogue. The motifs in these are related to the artist's illustrations for Jean Paulhan's book "La Metromanue au Les Dessous de la Capitale", for which Dubuffet also calligraphed the text. This exercise proved invaluable, dealing only with line, the artist could not rely on texture and colour to evoke feeling. Dealing with a favourite subject "Le Metro", Dubuffet showed great freedom of line in these illustrations. The drawings proved to be a great success, although executed in a familiar cartoon manner, they nonetheless have a simple, uncontrived charm.

It was not until the spring of 1950 that Dubuffet returned to painting in his haute pâte style. The artist embarked on a new series, the subject this time being the female nude. Dubuffet himself called this series "Corpes de Dames" (Ladies bodies). Because of the tradition of the female nude in western art, Dubuffet's nudes caused quite a controversy. The technique of these heads and busts is simple and direct. Impastos thickened with sand were laid on the canvass, then the wet paint mass was incised with lines and course scratchings. The earlier nudes appear unfinished rather than overworked (as is often the case with Dubuffet's work), which gives a refreshing dimension to his work. Attempting to deal with the nude meant a very special challenge, but was Dubuffet dealing with the nude per se or just using the nude to stand a sacrosanct theme on its head, i.e.

being superficially sensational ?

"My intention was that this type of drawing should confer on the figure no definite form whatsoever, that on the contrary it should hold it to a position of general concept and immateriality. It pleased me to juxtapose brutally in these female bodies the very general and very particular, the very subjective and the very objective, the metaphysical and the grotesquely trivial. Accordingly to my way of feeling, one becomes considerably reinforced by the presence of the other".¹

The series of nudes "Corpes de dame" began in April 1950 with "The bear cub, Lady's body". The overall impression of the painting is brutal, the diminutive head placed on an obese torso, the long outstretched arms and the grinning mouth make up an almost nightmarish figure. Certainly the overall image is striking and Dubuffet is successful in as much as such a brutal rendering of the female nude is certainly disturbing. The most interesting aspect of the painting however is perhaps the artist's use of line. Dubuffet has returned to the use of thick black outline, painted in this instance rather than scratched into the haute pâte. Line is minimal and is not used to any decorative end. The drawing in the painting is yet again of secondary importance.

"In the forty or fifty pictures I painted between April 1950 and February 1951 there was good reason not to take the drawing seriously. It was always outrageously crude and

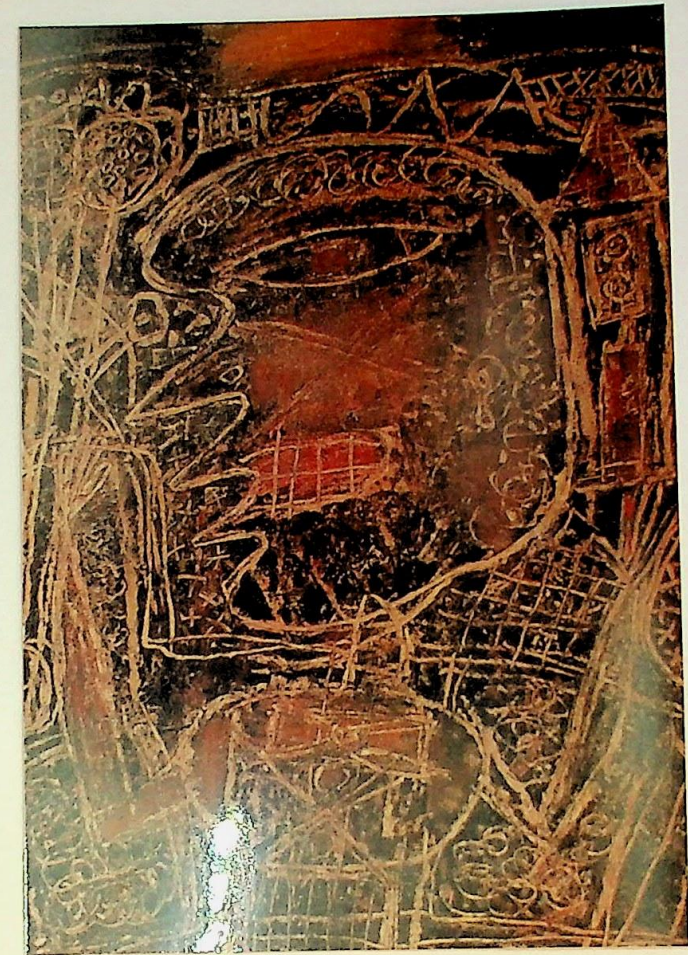




Plate 5 of *La Métromanie ou Les Dessous de la Capitale* /
Metromania or The Underside of the Capital
 by Jean Paulhan (1950). December 1949.
 Lithographic reproduction of reed pen drawing using
 lithograph ink on transfer paper, 7 7/8 x 7 7/8"
 (20 x 20 cm)



23 - "THE BEAR CUB, LADY'S BODY", 1950
- 52 -



careless, enclosing the figure of the nude woman in a way which, taken literally, would suggest abominably obese, deformed creatures".²

In these, ironically titled Ladies' bodies, Dubuffet spreads the nudes across the surface of the canvass like vast landscapes. In one way the massive figures are connected with his Paysages Grotesques yet in another way they suggest that perhaps the human figure can just as well represent a landscape.

By neglecting the head and exaggerating the torso Dubuffet appears to be trying to depersonalise the subject. The nude becomes a "thing" to paint rather than an image copied directly from nature.

"In the final analysis, here a general concept is displaced, both mentally and in its material embodiment, into a primary form with its own material properties and which, as such, lays claim to being read as a value in itself. Like the Grotesque Landscapes, the female bodies are turned into a field of action for painterly sensations".³

The above quotation identifies the basic problem of much of Dubuffet's work, the artist sacrifices content for the sake of technique. Dubuffet's nudes have greater implications than the artist had envisaged. The nudes come close to being misogynist in portrayal, even the title "The bear cub (Lady's body)" has suspicious undertones. In reducing the female nude to an

"object for painting", by depersonalising the female body but yet portraying a raw animal-like sexuality, is Dubuffet not exploiting the female nude in a highly familiar and far from "anti-traditional" manner ?

Dubuffet worked on numerous variations on this theme for approximately one year. During this period the artist displays a diverse approach to his subject. Compare "The bear cub (Lady's body)" with "Lady's body, gaudy bunch of flowers", the latter painted just five months later than the former. The former is heavy in colouring with a limited tonal range, the tonal range within the contours of the body being very close to the background. The aforementioned black outline uncharacteristically painted rather than inscribed. In the latter however, Dubuffet employs a wide range of colours, he uses an overpainting of flesh colour on the body, through which he incised his lines revealing an array of blues, reds, yellows and oranges. The background is painted in plum, which makes the figure appear to stand-out from the background, unlike in "The bear cub (Lady's body)". In the later example, the figure fills almost the entire surface as a virtually closed form. Again the figure is reminiscent of his landscapes, within whose boundaries the very spontaneous drawing ties together the anatomical details. The nervous energetic line is incised with a sharp object into the flesh coloured surface. The line evident in "Lady's body, gaudy bunch of flowers" seems to contradict Dubuffet's own words quoted earlier. Dubuffet sees his use of line as "careless", however this "carelessness"

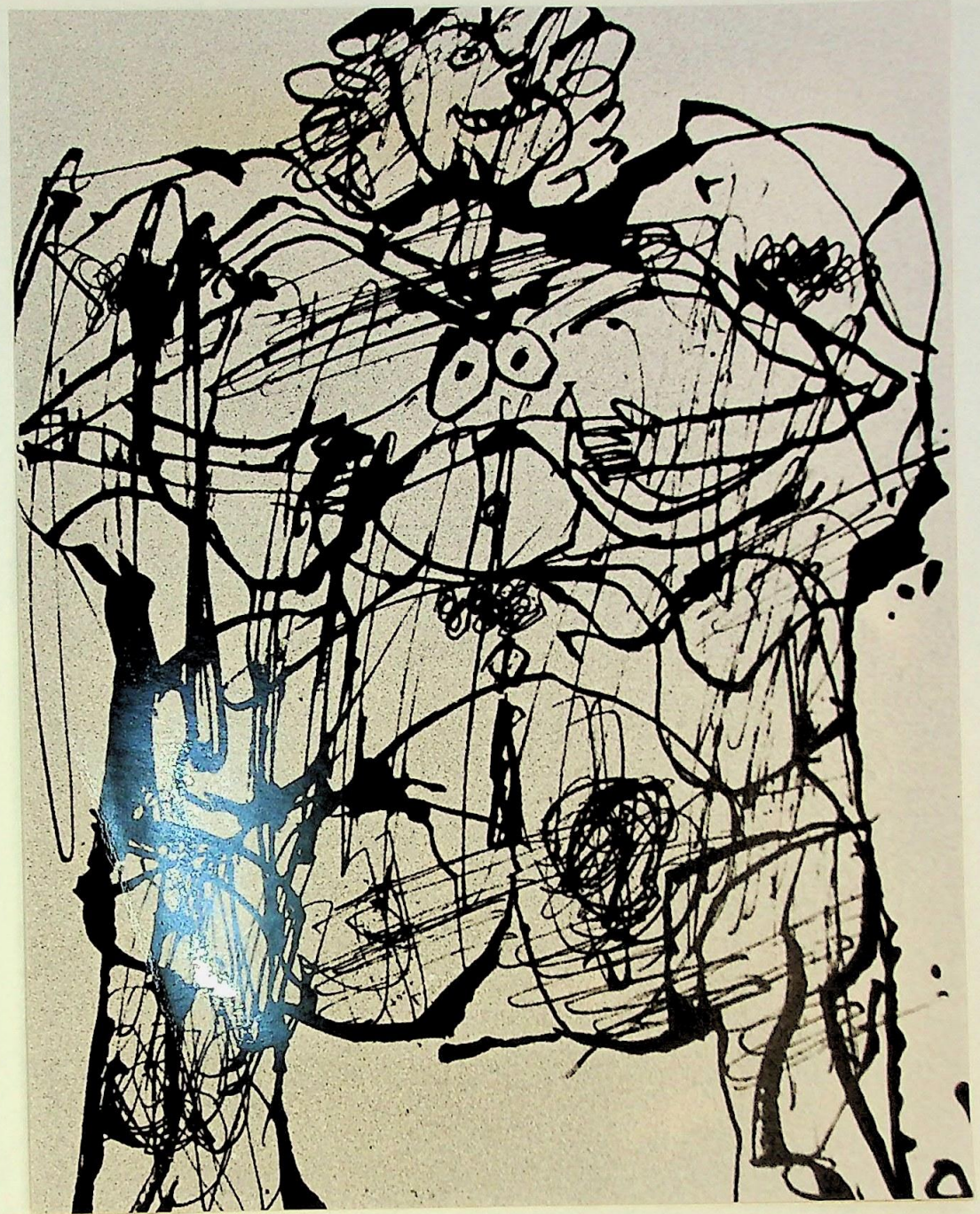
results in the effective fluidity of line, contrasting sharply with the outline in "The bear cub (Lady's body)". The use of line evident in "Lady's body, gaudy bunch of flowers", suggests again Dubuffet's interest in pattern and decorative mark making. While not as geometric as in say, his landscape series, it none the less heralds Dubuffet's subsequent use of line and colour in his "Hourloupes" series. At this time Dubuffet continued to make numerous pen and ink studies, almost all belonging to the nude ladies series. These drawings show a refreshing looseness of line. In his biography, Andreas Franzke describes Dubuffet's ink pen as "acting on the paper, restlessly and entirely without restraint; cascades of lines alternating with meandering contours, spurts, dots, splashes". On examination of Dubuffet's ink drawings, in particular "Ladies body" one can see a direct affinity between his painting and his drawing. The vivacity and directness of the image makes a far stronger visual statement than his highly worked paintings. Only "Ladies body, gaudy bunch of flowers" comes close to the immediate strength of his drawing, and it is hard to imagine Dubuffet being capable of painting such a heavy and still picture as "The bear cub (Lady's body)" while at the same time displaying such energy in his pen and ink drawings. It is curious too, to relate his pen drawings with his own self-critical and apologetic remarks on his own drawing quoted earlier.

The Corpses de Dames series led directly into his "landscapes of the mind" series. In this series Dubuffet at last allows the

paint to become the subject of the painting. The artist does not deny his primary interest in process, yet nonetheless he encourages the viewer to "imagine" the painting to be a portrayal of landscapes. Dubuffet at this time abandons his haute pâte technique and restricts himself to the use of an opaque synthetic resin. This material, being far removed from the earthy materials he employed previously, is used to portray natural surfaces. The artist enjoyed the challenge of representing nature, using unnatural materials.

"I enjoyed the idea that a single medium should have this double (ambiguous) power: to accentuate the actual and familiar character of certain elements (notably in figurations of ground and soils), and yet to precipitate other elements into a world of phantasmagoric irreality, borrowed from other worlds than ours - or the same kind of life, but captured on some of its other levels.....Ambiguous facts always have a great fascination for me, for they seem to me to be located at just these intersections where the real nature of things may be revealed".⁴

In "Paysage de l'informe" (landscape of the formless), the landscape is a uniform surface spread across the entire canvass, allowing just narrow familiar band of contrasting texture and colour suggesting an horizon. The hard impasto creates a relief pattern effect evocative of landscape but in an illustrative sense. I find the positioning of the sun however takes away from the overall effect. Such obvious figuration appears out of

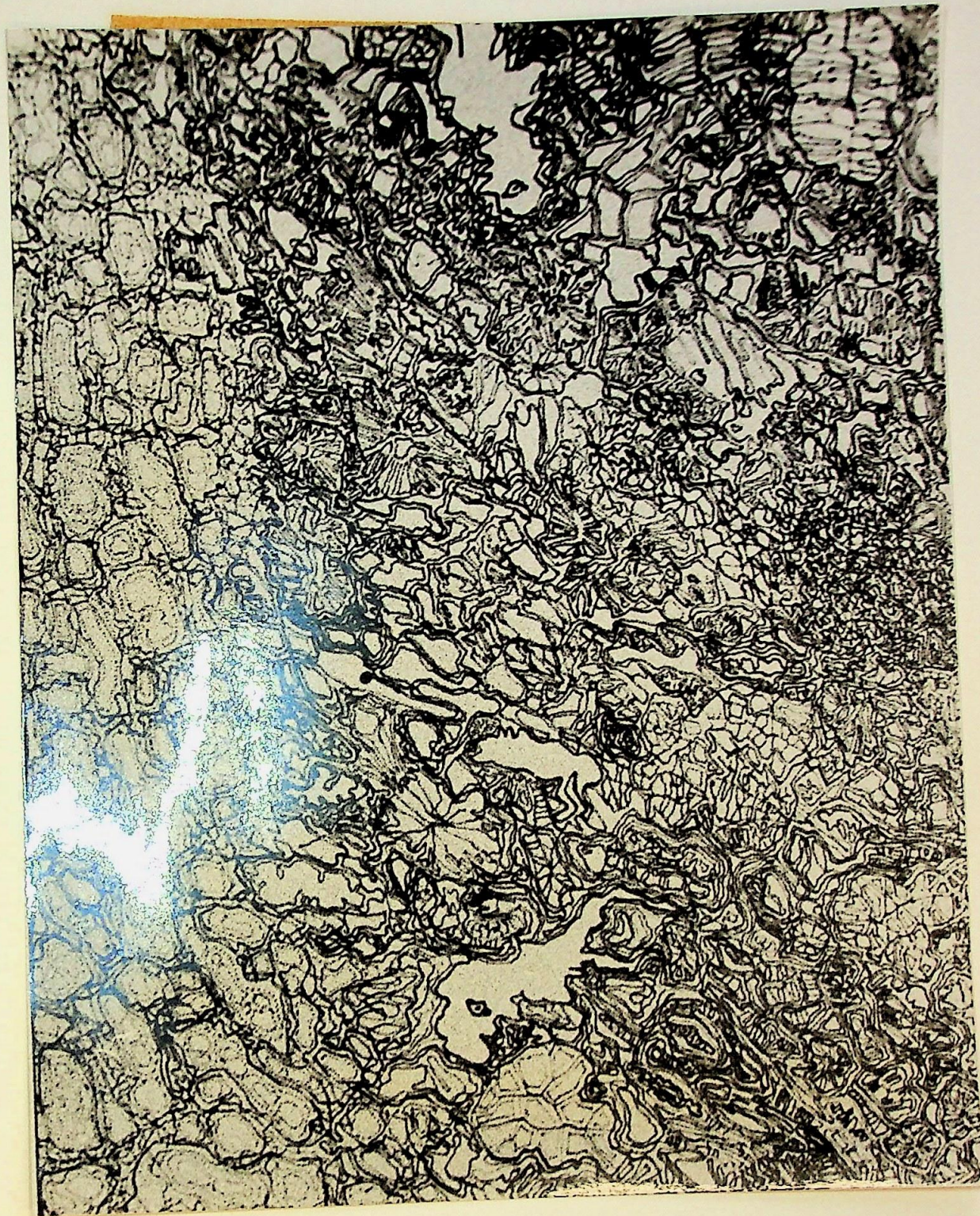


25 - "LADY'S BODY" (PEN AND INK)



26.

26 - "LANDSCAPE OF THE FORMLESS"



27 - "LANDSCAPE WITH DEAD DOG" (PEN AND INK)





context in this instance. Other examples of the same period anticipate an important cycle of pen drawings executed between June and October 1952.

In the drawing "Landscape with dead dog" we can see a cellular style evolving which was later to become Dubuffet's obsession. Again Dubuffet clings to figuration and suggested landscapes. While the figuration elements are easily identifiable, the previously well defined horizon has now fused and is barely suggested. This disorderly interplay of shapes and "cells" distinguishes this small piece as the direct forerunner of the Hourloupe style Dubuffet did not arrive at until 1962.

The graphic element in this and other drawings of this period attains much the same effect as was previously conveyed by the artist's use of paint. Through the fluidity and movement of the line Dubuffet's drawings achieve an almost tactile quality. Dubuffet, however refused to allow his work become totally non representational, he clung to subject-matter and continued to refer to "reality". It was not until 1960, in the Materiologies series that Dubuffet portrayed brute matter as such without any reference to real things or subjects.

In the later Paysages du Mental works, impastos convey impressions of subject matter in the guise of generalised landscapes. Here one finds the end result of Dubuffet's use of cells and a highly active linear language worked out in his

drawings. This progression is clearly evident in "Ecstasy in the sky", here Dubuffet lowers his horizon line and makes no obvious reference to figuration, the great cellular movement within the sky contrasts with the solid impastos of the land. Here Dubuffet's interest is undoubtedly textural with an added and deliberate interest in pattern. One would think at this stage that Dubuffet would have continued in this evidently satisfactory manner, however somehow the artist felt uneasy abandoning the figure and in October 1952 Dubuffet began a new series distinguished by a total rejection of surfaces treated in relief and by a return to the use of bright colour.

"Woman of fashion" is an early example of Dubuffet's new style. The artist employed a new technique, Dubuffet used a mixture of varnishes and oils resulting in a thin and fragile looking surface. The artist became preoccupied with process (see appendix) and the subject matter at times became almost incidental. A freely invented landscape with a figure appears in "The banished king" of November 1952. The landscape and figuration at this time were largely determined by effects arising from the reaction between substances thereby suggesting a certain autonomy of the medium not so clearly evident before. The new technique evolved, Dubuffet called "pâtes battues", here the artist made his pastes out of natural oil and powdered pigments, working them into a thick, smooth substance, he then spread them with a palette knife over wet layers of bright colour, so that the colour appears in their pure sense

occasionally or gave a tint to the paste. He then incised into the top layer (which was "doughy" rather than brittle) and down through the coloured layers to give an indication of the subject. The result is a group of paintings exhibiting exceptional freshness.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER 3

1. Jean Dubuffet, Prospectus et tous écrits suivant, Paris, p. 74.
2. Dubuffet, in George Limbour : L'art Brut de Jean Dubuffet, Matisse Gallery, New York 1953.
3. Andreas Franzke, Dubuffet p. 73
4. Dubuffet, Landscaped Tables, Landscapes of the mind, Stones of Philosophy, exhibition catalogue, New York, Matisse Gallery, 1952.

CONCLUSION

The original meaning of the term avant-garde implied "a dual interest in the process of the aesthetic and also in social change and revolt, it took the form of an elite of artists and intellectuals who chose to live on the fringe of society".¹ If Dubuffet could be seen as being a part of the avant garde he was certainly not one of its innovators. The art dealer and critic John Bernard Myers once asked Marcel Duchamp how many people he thought really liked "avant-garde" art, and Duchamp replied, "Ch, maybe ten in New York and one or two in New Jersey".² That was in 1945, at the same time Dubuffet was being hailed by such critics as Greenberg, and was having a favourable public reaction in New York at the Matisse Gallery. True, his exhibition at the Galerie Rene Drouin in 1944 brought him widespread disapproval and even protests, but it earned him enthusiastic reviews and support from influential people, with articles and special publications by Paul Eluard, Jean Paulhan, Marcel Arland and many others. What was Dubuffet's real effect on the arts ? In a scathing attack on Dubuffet in his book "The Age of the Avant Garde", Hilton Kramer writes:

"The truth is that the radication of Dubuffet's style has always been exaggerated by his admirers, but there can be no doubt that the style itself, whatever its debts and limitations, exactly suited the temper of post war art circles in Europe and the U.S. The whole nature of his success has been a remarkable example of an artist riding in

on a wave of feeling that his own work exploits and enlarges upon, but does not itself either create or in any way alter".

Ironically, Dubuffet's greatest artistic contributions appear to be on an intellectual level. The artist's article "l'Art Brut prefere aux art culturels" (1949), defined a hitherto neglected art form. Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut and his numerous writings resulted in the finding of a permanent home for his Art Brut collection in 1976, in a museum especially built for it in Lausanne. Dubuffet was more at home with his literary friends than his artist ones. He took no part in the Ecole de Paris formed after 1945 in the wake of the Cubists, Surrealists and Constructivists. His work proved ultimately to be at opposite poles to the Parisian aesthetics and understanding of form. There appear to be only a few friendships with artists, notably with Henri Michaux and Jean Fautrier. But Michaux began as a writer rather than a painter and Fautrier too, could be seen as an intellectual rather than a painter. Even though Dubuffet was more widely accepted and even acclaimed in the U.S. he never struck up any great friendship with any particular American artist. He did meet Pollock and indeed Pollock was interested in what he was doing and bought one of his Sahara gouaches. At a second meeting, when Pollock was in Paris in March '51 for his one man show at the studio Fachetti, Dubuffet helped him translate the introduction to the catalogue written by Michel Tapie. In New York Dubuffet occasionally saw Yves Tanguy, and

after his death he remained on friendly terms with Tanguy's wife, Kay Sage, whose book of poems "Mardicus" he illustrated with his Hourloupe figures in 1962. However it was his contact with younger painters such as Karel Appel, Alechinsky and Asger Jorn that illustrates his greatest artistic influence.

The Cobra group existed during the short period 1948-50. The name is taken from the names of the cities which the various participants hailed from; Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Among its members were the Belgian Corneille and the aforementioned Asger Jorn, Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky. The artists of the Cobra group were interested in "giving direct expression to subconscious fantasy with no censorship from the intellect".⁴ To an extent the Cobra group adopted the intellectual stance of Dubuffet, Fautrier and Wols, yet were aesthetically effected by the expressionism which had deep roots in Scandinavia (Munch), Holland and Belgium. The Cobra group revived and continued an old tradition while adopting a new intellectual reasoning. This led to a greater complexity of reference than was usual in the art of the immediate post-war period. Partly because of their blatant roots in pre-war art yet their adopting of many of the post-war Art Brut ideals, their impact was short-lived. However they have in their respective countries of origin had enormous influence on contemporary art. This influence can in many ways be traced directly to the art and writings of Dubuffet.

The current interest in Graffiti art could also be seen to have its roots in Art Brut and could be directly influenced by Dubuffet's writings on the subject.

"There are others, however, who believe graffiti art represents a genuine aesthetic, the personal expression of an oppressed and disenfranchised people. The composer John Cage says we should cherish every mark; and Norman Mailer wrote in his 1947 book "The faith of Graffiti" that the phenomenon was a tribal rebellion against an evil industrial civilization".

Above is an extract from Suzi Gablik's book "Has Modernism failed". The author discusses the modern phenomenon of graffiti art without reference to the historical precedents made by many of the Art Brut artists. The parallel between graffiti in the galleries today and Art Brut exhibited in the galleries in the '40's is clear, yet unappreciated. Many graffiti artists of today prefer to see themselves as "graffiti writers" paying direct homage to the written word. Dubuffet and many of his contemporaries also acknowledged the use of the written word and made no apologies for its blatant employment.

On Dubuffet's writings Hilton Kramer states:

"There is only one thing wrong with the essays Dubuffet has written on his own work: their dazzling intellectual finesse makes nonsense of his claim to a free and untutored primitivism. They show us a mandarin literary personality, full of chic phrases and up-to-date ideas, that is quite the

opposite of the naive visionary Whatever the virtues of spontaneous, unconscious creation may be, Dubuffet has never known them. His language is the language of the Lycee and the cafes, just as his art is the art of the studio".⁶

I would argue that Dubuffet at no time claimed that his own work was "untutored primitivism". While he acknowledged Art Brut per se, he never denied his own intellectualism and the effect it had on his own work. What Dubuffet did was to strive to react against traditional values, using Art Brut as an ideal from which to draw inspiration. Some of Kramer's statements are valid, for instance he rightly states that "what began as an assault on good taste has simply given rise to a new form of elegance", Have not countless artists and movements in the past undergone a similar reassessment? True, Dubuffet differed somewhat in that he set out to shock the art world, but at the time he surely could not anticipate the subsequent popular appeal of his work. The graffiti artists of New York, whose art was executed illicitly and could be seen to be a form of vandalism have now found their place in the museums of New York. Their work could also be seen as "a new form of elegance". Kramer appears to totally misunderstand Dubuffet's art, yet feels justified to attack the artist in a most prejudiced manner.

Dubuffet deserves more than such a shallow "appraisal". Indeed there is a need for an objectively critical appraisal of his work to be written. Andreas Franzke's biography is thorough but

borders on the romantic. Dubuffet is a complex individual who continues to effect the art world. This effect needs to be assessed critically. As an artist, Dubuffet has his shortcomings (as do all artists), but one could not deny his dedication to his work and his tireless pursuence of what is "reality" in art. Dubuffet questions our interpretations of art and in turn his art forces us to question our interpretation of reality. The influential Hilton Kramer writes:

"Dubuffet's whole career reminds me of a man using four-letter words at a fashionable dinner party. At first one is a little shocked, and then one smiles; the talk is resumed -
7
and the next course is served"

Is this fair ?

FOOTNOTES - CONCLUSION

1. Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism failed, p. 9.
2. Ibid, p. 14.
3. Hilton Kramer The Age of the Avant Garde, p. 76.
4. Jean-Clarence Lambet, Cobra, p. 17.
5. Gablik, p. 16.
6. H. Kramer, p. 78.
7. Ibid, p. 79.

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Hilton Kramer, The Age of the Avant Garde, Secker & Warburg,
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APPENDIX

On new canvas commercially prepared with white lead.

I painted in the personage roughly by spreading out a doughy paste of paint (Rollplastique). Onto this I threw a good lot of: 1) ashes almost everywhere, 2) sand in places, 3) coal dust in places.

Then I spread some of the paste (Rollplastique) around the figure to make the background. And with big sweeps of a large flat supple brush I brushed over this with a liquid paint—babyshit color (a lot of yellow, a little red, and a touch of black). Then, with the same brush, here and there summarily laid on bright red (liquid paint, but very thick). Finally, over all that, still with the same brush, a lot of black liquid paint (quite thick). Then I threw quite a lot of ashes across the whole ground. Then with the spatula I rubbed over it—which made the ashes really penetrate into it while the excess fell off—and this produced quite effective grattages.

Afterward I worked the figure. I rubbed with the spatula, summarily, so as to arrive at an irregular coarse substance (the ashes in some places penetrating into the paste).

Just as it was, the look of it was fairly pleasing (but a little confused, the figure not standing out well from the ground). Interruption for one hour (lunch).

I put some paste over the figure again (not everywhere but on a good part of it—especially to draw the contours, large outlines of white paste) (with spatula).

Then with the putty knife I redrew the figure (a little differently from before), and by grinding down into it ferociously with the putty knife, the ground color got dragged into it and it tinted (irregularly) the impasto of the figure.

Then I drew inside the figure by digging down with the point of a small spatula, and tinted those incised lines with a mixture based on turpentine tinted with brown (red and black).

And carefully traced the outlines of the figure with the point of a knife.

And put black all around (quite thick liquid black paint) so as to make the figure stand out (with large supple flat brush), and also over the ground.

To end up with, I varied the intensity of the lines a little (in some places using very light brown mixture based on turpentine; elsewhere, the same brown but thicker—and elsewhere still, black; all this with a small lettering brush), making use also of untinted pure turpentine.

From the artist's studio logbook for 1947-50

Sunday, 27 July 1952

New hardboard.

1. Sparkel with varnish added, tinted deep pink (2 tablespoons of red ocher and 1 tablespoon of ultramarine, in powder). Exterior varnish mixed with burnt sienna ground in oil (1 entire tube of burnt sienna to 5 to 6 tablespoons of varnish). 7 tablespoons of this mixture added to the basin of Sparkel. Added 3 handfuls of fine sand (a little of this paste set aside for later applications).

2. Operation (right away, losing no time): a second basin of Sparkel made for this (always 1 full 5-1b. package for 1 basinful), this time tinted with 2 tablespoons of red ocher and 1 tablespoon of ultramarine (exactly as in the preceding operation) but with the addition of pure varnish (not mixed with tube of burnt sienna).

3. Operation (right away): made for this 1/2 basin of Sparkel, this time tinted with half red ocher and half ultramarine.

Sunday, 3 August 1952

On this paste, now good and dry, directly (without previous coating of shellac or anything else):

1. Covered it completely with various deep colors (each color beaten up on the palette with turpentine and a generous admixture of siccativ): various brown tones—yellow brown, red brown, violet brown—and even certain bright reds or very strong yellows were made out of mixtures of yellow ocher, orange, bright red, red ocher, violet, blue, madder, burnt sienna (and never using white), resulting in tones all tending somewhat to a rust color.

2. Pale apricot yellow then applied almost casually, using soft graining brush, to everything standing out above the surface in relief (paint as before beaten up on the palette with oil of turpentine and siccativ).

3. This light color was then wiped and rubbed with a rag. NB: I could have done without tinting the Sparkel at the start because that first paste was subsequently covered over entirely.