Abstract Expressionism

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Greenberg Misreading Dubuffet

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In his article "Review of Exhibitions of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock," published in the February 1, 1947, issue of The Nation, the American art critic Clement Greenberg discusses works from Dubuffet's first solo show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York (January 7, 1947–February 1, 1947) and Pollock's fourth one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim's The Art of This Century Gallery (January 14, 1947–February 1, 1947). Throughout the review Greenberg's tone is dead serious; his pace, rapid. At certain points it sounds as if he is sitting ringside at a heavyweight title bout. Dubuffet and Pollock, the two contenders battling it out for the title of "the" postwar avant-garde artist, are for the most part evenly matched. Greenberg notes that Dubuffet and Pollock similarly handle the canvas in an active, "over-all" manner. Both artists display their artistic prowess through their physical handling of the paint and ability to integrate the "surface" of the canvas. Specifically, he says, Dubuffet's paintings display "intensity" and "concentration," while Pollock's have "power" and "astounding force."

In the end it is Pollock, of course, who comes out on top—but not for the reasons we might immediately expect. Greenberg favors Pollock not only because he is the American, and because his paintings are ultimately "rouglier and more brutal" (and therefore more "virile") 4, but also because, he asserts, Pollock has finally "gone beyond the stage where he needs to make his poetry explicit in ideographs." 4 Pollock, in other words, has at last renounced subject matter altogether in favor of pure abstraction, he is no longer interested in including those kinds of graphic elements evinced in earlier paintings such as Stenographic Figure (1942, plate 18), The Moon Woman (1942), Male and Female (ca. 1942), and Guardians of the Secret (1943). Conversely, Greenberg faults Dubuffet for being "insincere"—he "paints from the heights of culture"; his paintings represent "a state of mind," not a "way of art." 5

If Greenberg does not feel the need to qualify his nebulous statements about Dubuffet here, it is probably because he had done so already in an earlier article, "Review of an Exhibition of
School of Paris Painters” (concerning a group show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, May 1–30, 1946)—the first article in which he discusses Dubuffet at length. Although he admits Dubuffet “seems to be the most original painter to have come out of the School of Paris since Miro,” Greenberg is forthright about what he perceives to be “Frenchman’s” fatal flaw; Dubuffet, he succinctly states, “reveals literary leanings.” His paintings are at once too literary and too literal. They represent the transposition of one medium onto another, painting’s abdication to literature.

In hindsight, then, it becomes clear that Greenberg, a literary critic turned art critic, and the self-proclaimed “newer” G.E. Lessing, chose to pit Dubuffet against Pollock in November of 1947 for the express purpose of reinforcing the barrier he had already erected between literature and painting seven years before in his widely read essay, “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940). As T.J. Clark has rightly observed, this essay, together with “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), is utterly fundamental, it “stakes out the ground for Greenberg’s later practice as a critic and sets down the main lines of a theory and history of culture since 1850.” And while he was not the first major twentieth-century critic to resuscitate Lessing’s argument in the name of media purity—for example, there was Irving Babbit’s The New Laokoon: An Essay on Confusion in the Arts written in 1910 and later, Rudolf Arnheim’s 1938 essay, “A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film”—Greenberg goes further than his predecessors in stressing the necessity of a division between painting and literature, and making this the very basis for his own aesthetic judgments. From Greenberg’s perspective, artists who attempt to mix the two are inferior by definition. “Painting and sculpture in the hands of lesser talents . . .,” he maintains, “become nothing more than ghosts and “stooges” of literature. All emphasis is taken away from the medium and transferred to subject matter.” Further, Greenberg takes a potshot at Bretonian Surrealism and the idea of automatic writing when he reminds his readers that avant-garde painting should be a “revolt against the dominance of literature,” not a “vessel of communication.”

So, according to Greenberg, just what kind of “literary leanings” was Dubuffet guilty of? The answer to this question comes in an article the critic published in The Nation immediately following his aforementioned “Review of an Exhibition of School of Paris Painters,” namely, “Jean Dubuffet and French Existentialism.” In the article’s opening paragraphs Greenberg laments: “French painting . . . has become directly dependent as never before on literary and philosophical movements.” Dubuffet’s art, he contends, is a one-for-one illustration of “the world-hating attitudes revealed by French Existentialism” as revealed in Sartre’s 1938 novel Nausea.

At this point, the certitude and finality of Greenberg’s statements could easily lead to a discussion of Sartre’s influence on postwar art in France and America or we might be tempted to prematurely conclude that Sartrean Existentialism was the “international language” shared by
the postwar French and American avant-gardes alike. There is certainly grounds for a discussion of this sort. Sartre’s ideas saturated the artistic milieu in postwar France. Likewise, Sartre’s influence quickly traversed the Atlantic. By the time Sartre first visited New York in December of 1945 he was already being hailed as an intellectual and Résistance hero, and Existentialism quickly became a popular catchphrase in America. Sartre’s name not only appeared in mainstream publications such as the New Yorker and Harper’s Bazaar, it was featured in avant-garde journals such as View. At a more biographical level, we might turn our attention to the fact that Greenberg was a personal acquaintance of Sartre’s; the two had met in Paris before the war, and probably saw each other again during one of Sartre’s postwar trips to America 1945–46. Starting in the summer of 1945, a series of Sartre’s recent essays were translated and published in Partisan Review, a journal for which Greenberg once served as an editor, and continued to be associated with throughout the 1940s. In reciprocal fashion, it was most likely Sartre himself who invited Greenberg to contribute the article “L’Art américain au XXe siècle,” to a special issue of Les Temps Modernes dedicated to the United States, published in August 1946.

However, these are not the kind of connections I am interested in pursuing today, because, first, in my opinion there has already been enough scholarly attention devoted to the relationship between Existentialism and the postwar avant-gardes. Suffice it to mention Sarah Wilson’s work on Existentialism and art in postwar France, and Nancy Jarche and Ann Gibson’s articles on Existentialism and its relation to Abstract Expressionism in America. Secondly, because I am convinced that in many ways Dubuffet and Sartre were diametrically opposed figures. Whenever Dubuffet spoke about Existentialism he did so mockingly. In an interview printed in Vogue, May 1952, he openly insists that his paintings have nothing to do with the philosophical movement. Sartre, in fact, amounts to a conspicuous absence in Dubuffet’s art and copious writings. For example, Sartre’s likeness was not included in the series of portraits of literary figures that Dubuffet famously exhibited at the Galerie René Drouin in October of 1947 (plate 19). In Dubuffet’s voluminous correspondence with key members of the postwar literary elite Sartre’s name is rarely mentioned. One outstanding exception occurred after Dubuffet caught wind of the public debate between Sartre and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a writer whom Dubuffet greatly admired. In his 1946 Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre had charged Céline with anti-Semitism and suggested that the controversial writer once worked for the Nazis. Shortly thereafter Céline responded with “Agitée du bocal,” a venomous essay in which he called Sartre a parasitic tapeworm. In a letter to Jean Paulhan dated July 7, 1948, Dubuffet wrote: “I have re-read Céline’s marvelous text on Sartre 36 times. What a pleasure! ... Sartre is a good for nothing little turd ... compared to the great Céline!” Conversely, Sartre, as far as I can tell, had little if any interest in
Dubuffet. In fact, in his large body of writing on postwar art the philosopher mentions Dubuffet only once, and this is in passing, in “Doigts et Non-Doigts.” For Sartre, Wols, Giacometti, Masson, and perhaps even Genet embodied Existentialism—Dubuffet did not.

I would like instead to take things in a slightly different direction. My interest in Greenberg's interpretation of Dubuffet stems from something that begins to stick out like a sore thumb after one rereads Greenberg's article on Dubuffet and Existentialism; namely, the fact that Greenberg chooses to relate Dubuffet's art back to a prewar novel—that is, Sartre's *Nausea*. In so doing, Greenberg glosses over the great historical (and literary) rupture caused by World War II, the Occupation, the Holocaust and its aftermath, suggests a seamless continuation between the pre- and postwar literary and artistic avant-gardes, and connects Dubuffet's paintings to a novel, and hence the idea of narrativity. Greenberg, in short, associates Dubuffet's work with *histoire* in both senses of the French term—"history" and "narrative"—precisely, those two things Dubuffet spent his entire artistic career rejecting.

Greenberg fails to admit that the war radically disrupted the conventions of the French novel. To a certain extent, with the *drôle de Guerre* and the Occupation of France also came the defeat of narrativity. Storytelling lost its way, or became disoriented, like the narrator in Saint Exupéry's *Night Flight* (1944). Further, stories ceased to have clear-cut beginnings and endings, and temporality was often fragmented or arrested, as in Julien Gracq's *Un Balcon en forêt* (1940). Perhaps Sartre himself could serve as our case and point. At the onset of the war Sartre began to write a three-part novel called *The Roads to Freedom*. Although the first two parts of it, *The Age of Reason* and *The Reprieve*, did appear in September 1945, he never finished the final volume, tentatively titled *The Last Chance*. The manuscript for this project, as Annie Cohen-Solal has noted in her biography of Sartre, is riddled with instances in which Sartre repeatedly wrote and erased the words "The End."

In Greenberg's Manichean universe painting either has "explicit subject matter" or it is abstract. It either attempts to tell a story over time through "poetry" and "ideographs," or it presents itself immediately to the viewer. There is no middle ground. Similarly, Greenberg cannot conceive of a category of literature explicitly about nothing, or a species of writing which resists narrative, stresses the opacity of the signifier and the importance of the physical gesture, the manual trace—in short, precisely the kind of literature that emerged in postwar France in opposition to Sartre's *littérature engagée*, a literature which became known in poststructural discourse as "écriture" in its many guises. Greenberg is correct in asserting Dubuffet's work is deeply attuned to the literature of his time, but he wrongly assumes it is Sartre's literature. If Dubuffet does indeed have "literary leanings" then they are undeniably
towards this alternative form of postwar
French literature.

Take, for example, one of Dubuffet’s six
Messages (1944) (figure 30), in which legibility
is pushed to its limits, and narrative is
fragmented beyond recuperation. Note-
worthy also is the fact that these hasty
scrawls are done on scraps of newspaper. It
is literally a defacement, and effacement, of
journalistic writing, which is precisely the
kind of writing Sartre would promote as
committed literature. Art historian Sarah
Wilson has related Dubuffet’s Messages and
overarching interest in graffiti to the French
resistance, and the broken forms of communi-
cation that were used to avoid detection in occu-
pied France. However, in my opinion we should be wary of giving into associations of this
sort—Dubuffet was not a resistance figure (his politics were questionable at best and he made a
living selling wine to the Germans during the occupation), and these Messages do not success-
fully communicate anything. One reads, “That will teach you,” while another one says, “I will wait
for you until 8:00. Come back.” Dubuffet’s Messages, it seems to me, are ultimately about the very
impossibility of communication and narrativity.

While Greenberg was doubtless unaware of these small, obscure works, he most likely saw
Dubuffet’s series of lithographs exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York (from Octo-
ber 10 to November 1, 1947). With their roughly incised lettering, Dubuffet’s handmade covers
for the catalog set the stage for many of the works featured in the show (figure 31). Several lith-
ographs, including Dactylographe (1944) contained bizarre typographical elements or illegible
textual fragments. Tellingly, Greenberg never mentions a word about this show. Simply put, it
represents the side of Dubuffet’s oeuvre that escapes Greenbergian aesthetics. However, one of
Greenberg’s contemporaries, the American critic Henry McBride, did see Dubuffet’s Lithogra-
phies exhibit at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and wrote a review in which he perspicaciously notes:

The new collection of lithographs is so full of gaiety and charm and distinction that one is
now tempted to conclude that lithography may eventually turn out to be [Dubuffet’s] true
medium. Just what this charm is that he exerts is difficult to say but it is much the same
sort of thing you get in the captivating poems of Jacques Prévert—a genius whose lone friend in America seems to be myself for I never meet anyone who has heard of him yet. If André Gide, Paul Valery and Paul Eluard were rolled into one and proffered me in exchange for him, I wouldn’t accept.²⁵

Prévert, a former “dissident” Surrealist, was also a playwright and collagist. In 1945 he published Paroles, a hodgepodge collection of poems, cabaret songs, and improvisational writings scribbled on the backs of envelopes, napkins, and scraps of paper. Dubuffet was a great admirer of Prévert’s work, and at one point was invited by the author to make a cover for Paroles.²⁶ For reasons that are still unclear, Prévert eventually chose instead to use one Brassai’s photographs of Parisian graffiti. However, Dubuffet and Prévert remained friends and shared the honor of becoming official members of the Collège de Pataphysique (a secret society of avant-garde literary figures devoted to the preservation and celebration of Alfred Jarry’s legacy) around the same time in the early 1960s.²⁷

Compared to Greenberg, McBride better understands Dubuffet’s relationship to postwar French literature. Prévert, along with two of Dubuffet’s other acquaintances, Antonin Artaud and Henri Michaux, created what Jean Paulhan described, in direct opposition to Sartre, “Uncommitted Literature”—that is, texts which have nothing to do with “the great social and national conflicts that people have lately tended to bore us with.”²⁸ Like Dubuffet, Artaud was interested in illegible texts and graphic marks that fail to signify; his drawings done while interned at an insane asylum in Rodez, France, attest to this much.²⁹ In his popular collection of writings, Theater and Its Double, he treats the human body as a kind of unreadable hieroglyph.³⁰ And his own performances often involved nonsensical words or sounds. Dubuffet captures the essence of Artaud’s undecipherable body language in his 1947 portrait entitled Antonin Artaud aux Houppes (1947). The French writer and artist Henri Michaux is most often remembered for his experiments with mescaline and other mind-altering drugs in the mid-1950s, but he also invented alphabets and practiced pseudo-writing, as demonstrated in his series of Alphabets done in 1947. In his text on Réquichot, Roland Barthes speaks about the birth of “special kind of semiography . . . : illegible writing” which he rightly claims was initiated by Michaux, among
others after the war.31 Both Artaud and Michaux we should recall, were admired by many of the Abstract Expressionists, and not surprisingly, they figured prominently in the Abstract Expressionist artist-run periodical, *Tiger’s Eye*—which leads me to my next point.

Greenberg’s misreading of Dubuffet’s work prevented it from being associated with a side of Abstract Expressionism with which it ultimately has much in common, for there exists within postwar American painting a similar anti-narrative impulse, a fascination with opaque graphic elements, pseudo-writing, and signs that fail to signify. And while I am skeptical of any attempt to promote Abstract Expressionism as an international language, I do think that it is possible to talk about the American and French avant-garde’s shared interest in a sort of international non-language that reflected the impossibility of narrative during and after the war. For me this shared concern is evinced not only in the ideographic elements in the Pollock paintings cited before, but also in other Abstract Expressionist works, including Mark Tobey’s *Transit* (1948), David Smith’s *Letter* (1950), and Adolph Gottlieb’s *Letter to a Friend* (1948) (figure 32). Gottlieb, who once said “I have no desire to communicate with everyone” and gave a lecture on the importance of “Unintelligibility” at the Museum of Modern Art on May 5, 1948, certainly did not want his work to be read in any traditional sense, or to tell a story.33

This side of Abstract Expressionism is usually exoticized or primitivized and related to Northwest Coast Native American Indian art, mythic symbols, ancient archetypes, “Oriental” calligraphy, or it is simply derided as retrograde Surrealism. However, those works listed above resist facile categorizations. Therefore it might be more helpful to consider these works as extreme examples of what Ann Gibson has called Abstract Expressionism’s “evasion of language”:34 their collective
goal seems to be evoking language for the sole purpose of more forcefully denying it. David Anfam is the only scholar who has seriously investigated Abstract Expressionism's inherent resistance to narrative. In his 1993 article “Interrupted Stories: Reflections on Abstract Expressionism and Narrative,” he shows how, in spite of the fact that many of the artists spoke about the need for immediate communication between the work and the viewer, the movement as a whole emphasized “negation, difficulty, self-reflexive-ness, barriers, breaks, thresholds . . . and aporia.” He justifiably concludes, “Abstract Expressionism tells no genuine stories. If there ever were sustaining plots, then they yield to enigma.”

While Greenberg never addresses this side of Abstract Expressionism directly, he dances around it from time to time when he speaks of “the School of Klee,” or more frequently, Klee's “poetry.” Greenberg maintains that Dubuffet is a disciple of Klee, as are the “lesser” American Abstract Expressionists Gottlieb, Tobey, and Morris Graves. To some extent he is right, Klee, as evinced in his Abstract Script of 1931 (figure 33), was also interested in invented alphabets, illegible writing, and meaningless signs. For Greenberg, “poetry” takes on negative connotations because, again, it stands for narrative's intrusion into painting. However, for Barthes, writing
simultaneously in France, the word represents something positive. In *Écriture Degré Zero*, a collection of essays begun in 1947 in direct response to Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* Barthes explains that “poetry” is a liberating force because it posits a reality that is personal and ultimately impenetrable to history. 38 If Dubuffet’s work does indeed contain poetry, then it is surely Barthes’s, not Greenberg’s.

In “Jean Dubuffet and *Art Brut,*” Greenberg’s third and final article devoted exclusively to Dubuffet, the critic unwittingly opens the door to a more original and ultimately more profitable approach to Dubuffet’s art when he notes the artist’s proximity to the changing conventions of the postwar French novel—or what has become known as the *nouveau roman.* Greenberg writes:

“Dubuffet discovered art brut at a time when many advanced writers in France were beginning to question the premises of literature itself as a cultivated discipline and some among them were attempting—as they still are—to bring the novel and short story closer to actual contemporary experience by stripping the narrative of its acquired conventions.”39

Here, Greenberg leads up to, but never fully considers the possibility that Dubuffet’s overall postwar project might overlap with or even participate in this sea change in French literature. It was not until 1962 that the important American literary critic Wylie Sypher dedicated a chapter of his book *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art* to Dubuffet and the rise of the New Novel. Sypher argued that Dubuffet’s impersonal style and death-of-the-author stance paralleled the new forms of subjectivity and narrative ambiguity found in contemporary French novels. Dubuffet admired Sypher’s chapter so much he paid someone to translate it so that it could be published in an issue of the important French literary journal *Les Cahiers de L’Hermé* (1973), dedicated to himself.40 This is a connection that warrants additional scholarly attention, especially given the fact that Dubuffet was a close friend and avid reader of the Nobel Prize–winning New Novelist Claude Simon. Their correspondence, which sheds light on both Dubuffet’s interest in the New Novel, and Simon’s interest in modern painting, was published in 1994.41

I would like to conclude then by suggesting that there are three second-generation postwar American artists—Claes Oldenburg, Cy Twombly, and Ray Johnson—who clearly recognized a side of Dubuffet that Greenberg willfully neglected. As is often the case, artists see what critics miss. Collectively their works stand as a demurral to Greenberg’s call for a division between art and literature, and as such go against his reading of Dubuffet as a simple illustrator of Existen-
a kind of closed-circuit conversation, or better yet, an inside joke between Oldenburg and the subject of his “anxiety of influence.” It suggests that Dubuffet’s true legacy is literary, not painterly—conceptual, not material. In reality it is likely that this sentence was frequently muttered in Oldenburg’s presence. Oldenburg’s work then could be accurately described as a literal transcription of the spoken word. This is something that Dubuffet was extremely interested in as well, to the point that he create a series of so-called textes en jargon, or books written in French so orthographically incorrect they have to be read aloud—performed—to be understood. A year before this Oldenburg completed an ink-on-paper work, Dubuffet-Céline-Frenchmen (1959), which associated Dubuffet with a twentieth-century French writer whose use of slang, the first person, and tortured narrative challenged the French novel more than any other author. Dubuffet was with Céline’s widow when he first saw Oldenburg’s work in October of 1969, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Immediately afterward Dubuffet wrote a letter to Oldenburg and professed how “touching” it was to discover his “own name associated with the great writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline.”

Twombly, like several other second-generation postwar American artists, is extremely cognizant of the history of art, and his place within it. He purposefully positioned himself at the end of a line of important modernists, including Manet and Picasso, when he decided to resuscitate the theme of Olympia in 1955. The last artist to do this before him was Dubuffet, in 1950. Twombly astutely recognized the inherent horizontality of Dubuffet’s Olympia, and its affinities to what Leo Steinberg has famously described as the “flatbed picture plane,” which is to say, “a surface on which
objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion.” What Twombly chose to borrow from Dubuffet then was not his particular depiction of the female nude, but rather the work’s conceptual thrust, which plays itself out on the horizontal vector of writing. But, as Barthes reminds us, Twombly’s marks never become writing per se; he simply uses them to create a field that alludes to writing. For art critic Robert Pincus-Witten these marks represent a rejection of the heroic painterly gestures of Abstract Expressionism, in the face of which Twombly had no other choice.
but to start with “elemental beginnings” and “learn to write again.” For me, however, Twombly’s marks are not as much an outright rejection of Abstract Expressionism as they are a recognition and perpetuation of something always already present within it. Less obvious perhaps is a connection that I think can be made between Dubuffet’s artistic legacy and Twombly’s work Criticism (figure 35), which above all seems to mock the critic’s inability to write about pseudo-writing, or writing that signifies nothing. Twombly’s inscriptions solicit deciphering, only to repeatedly frustrate it. As the eminent art historian Hubert Damisch has suggested in his discussion of the unreadable panels in an anonymous Renaissance Città ideale, examples of simulated writing in painting function as an absence of representation and signal the impossibility of ekphrasis, narrative closure, and aesthetic judgment—which is to say art historical writing itself. Dubuffet constantly challenged the idea that painting needed to be described or translated into language before it could be understood. For example, in a text entitled “Envoi” which appeared in the aforementioned issue of Les Cahiers l’Hére, Dubuffet reminds us that a work of art should resist elucidation “so that every attempt to precisely interpret it will not affect its power to intrigue and disorient.” In the end “it should remain (even for the author himself) a question and not a response.” The desire to remain obscure and challenge critics and potential interpreters resides at the core of Abstract Expressionism as well. We need only to recall the title of the early Abstract Expressionist exhibit organized by Howard Putzel in May of 1945—A Problem for Critics.

And finally, there is a bizarre little book by American artist Ray Johnson, Jean Dubuffet Fan Club (1988) (figure 36), roughly the same size as Dubuffet’s first handmade book of phonetic
writing, *Ler Dla Canpane* (1947). Jean Dubuffet *Fan Club* contains an absurdist, nonsensical dialog between Johnson and Clive Phillpot, wherein Dubuffet’s name is mentioned along with William Blake’s and Mickey Mouse’s (tacitly, Johnson suggests the three are kindred spirits—like Blake, Dubuffet effectively combined word and image in his art, and like Mickey, he was able to tap into an uniquely American cult of childhood). As such, the book stands as the record of a spontaneous oral exchange, “which took place in the formal garden at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, Roslyn New York, on September 21, 1986, at 2:00 p.m.” Once again writing is subordinated to the spoken word. In 1973 Johnson established “The New York Correspondence School” and began to practice what has since become known as “Mail Art.” Johnson’s artful correspondences were in many ways prefigured by Dubuffet’s own. Dubuffet, the *artiste-épistoliaire extraordinaire*, exchanged frivolously illustrated letters with Pierre Bettencourt, Florence Gould, Alain Pauzié, and Gaston Chaissac, among others. In fact, letter writing was the only genre of literature that Dubuffet truly appreciated. In a letter to his friend Jacques Berne, whom he once reprimanded for wanting to write novels, Dubuffet explained: “letters have an improvisational character (like a drawing) (like a footprint in the sand) that is why I like them, but never keep them.”

In the end, these three American artists—Oldenburg, Twombly, and Johnson—celebrate a side of Dubuffet that Clement Greenberg’s interpretation closed off—a side which was in fact very international, and one which had much in common with Abstraction Expressionism. They demonstrate, ironically, that Dubuffet’s postwar production was indeed “a revolt against the dominance of literature,” and accordingly, conforms to Greenberg’s narrow definition of avant-garde art.
insistently material: aluminum, not silver. "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in T. J. Clark, Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 331. I would argue that Pollock's use of these materials cannot be separated from kitsch since the use of such low-cost industrial materials by the Abstract Expressionists in general emphasizes in a material sense the continuum of painting with everyday material culture. In other words, although Abstract Expressionism today has been incorporated into the canon of high modernism, its insistent material literalness actually heightens our experience of it as an ordinary object.


Greenberg Misreading Dubuffet

This paper, delivered on May 19, 2004, at the first annual Pollock-Krasner Study Center conference, was originally titled "Greenberg's Dubuffet." Shortly after the conference, I received, via Columbia University's Office of Interlibrary Loan, a microfiche version of Sophie Berrebi's unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Outsider as Insider: Jean Dubuffet and the United States 1945–1973 (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2002), which includes a subsection of a chapter devoted to "Greenberg's Dubuffet" (97–109). In deference to Dr. Berrebi, I have retitled my paper here.


2. Ibid., 124–25.


5. Ibid., 123.
7. Ibid., 90.
13. Ibid.
20. Jean Paul Sartre, "Doigts et Non-Doigts," (1961), translated as "Fingers and Non-Fingers," in Wols, ed. Werner Haftmann (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965), 30–41. Sartre’s passage on Dubuffet reads: "There are two ways of illustrating the otherness of being. The first is to reveal in a finger the cancerous presence of All Things. Dubuffet excels at this. He paints his women in purulent pinks, glands and viscera in full bloom, cheerful undernourished bugs with meatus, two breasts, and a thinly grooved sex; they are non-women stripped of all myth, trembling on the surface of the inorganic. At first Wols set out on this path, but he did not have Dubuffet’s strong, pungent materialism to sustain him (37).


24. The catalogue contained an exhaustive list of Dubuffet’s lithographic works to date. The series of lithographs Dubuffet created to illustrate Eugene Guivellic’s book of poetry, Les Murs, were supposed to be included in the show but were lost on route to the gallery. For more on this see Dubuffet’s letter to Matisse, dated October 28, 1947, reprinted in Pierre Matisse and His Artists, ed. William M. Griswold and Jennifer Tonkovich (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 2002), 210.


30. Antonin Artaud, Theater and Its Double. Dubuffet was extremely fond of this book and in a letter to Artaud dated January 15, 1945, that he explained that he held similar ideas about painting. See Prospets et tus écrits suivants 4, ed. Hubert Damiéch (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 98.


32. For example, passages from Artaud’s "Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society," appeared in


42. For more on this see Sophie Berribi, "Dubuffet pilote: Claes Oldenburg regarde Jean Dubuffet," in Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne 77 (Autumn 2001): 80–91; a facsimile of Dubuffet's letter to Oldenburg is reproduced on p. 90.


44. Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper" (1979) reprinted in The Responsibility of Forms,
trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 157–76. The passage in question reads: "TW's work—others have said as much—is a kind of writing; it has some relation with calligraphy. Yet this relation is one neither of imitation nor of inspiration; a canvas by TW is only what we might call the allusive field of writing (allusion, a rhetorical figure consists in saying one thing with the intention of making another understood)" (158).


Abstract Expressionism's Italian Reception: Questions of Influence


3. Shapiro, reprinted in Frascina, _Pollock and After_, 188.


6. Ibid., 449.


10. Works by the younger generation of abstract painters included William Baziotes’s _Sunscape_ (1945); Stuart Davis’s _Ursine Park_; Arshile Gorky’s _Argula_ (1938); Jacob Lawrence’s _Going Home_ (1946); Irene Rice Pereira’s _Green Depth_ (1944); Mark Rothko’s _Baptismal Scene_; Theodoros Stamos’s _Ancestral Worship_ (1947); Mark Tobey’s _Broadway_; Bradley Walker Tomlin’s _Still Life_ (Inward Perception). The most useful history of American participation at the various Venice Biennales is Philip Bynands and Enzo di Martino, _Flying the Flag for Art: The United States and The Venice Biennale 1895–1991_ (Richmond, Va.: Wykdore and Wolfertan, 1993).


14. Guggenheim’s collection of New York School abstraction and other midcentury American painters included: William Baziotes’s _Three Doors_ (1944) (now in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art); _The Room_ (1945), and an untitled gouache (1945); Richard Pousette-Dart’s _Spirit_ (1946) (now in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art); a Gorky untitled oil (1944); Matta’s _Deep Stones_ (1938) (now in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art) and an untitled oil (1942); Robert Motherwell’s (Autoportrait) _Surprise and Inspiration_ (1943); Jackson Pollock’s _Eyes in the Heat_ (1946), _Moon Woman_ (1942), _Two_ (1943), _Circumcision_ (1945), an untitled drawing (1942), and _Don Quixote_; Rothko’s _Sacriifice_ (1943); Janet Sobel’s _The Frightened Bride_ (now in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art); Clifford Still’s _Jamaica_ (1945).

15. _XXIV Biennale di Venezia_, 330–32.