

Translated by Kent Minturn and Priya Wadhera

"It's not being an exceptional man that is so marvelous, it's being a man;"¹ but the undertaking is not so easy, when one believes neither in gift nor in genius, to cover a canvas which is like a fragment of the human condition, with our humors and most constant thoughts, and with our most assiduous perceptions.² This task that Jean Dubuffet formulated for his own use, in his *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre* from 1946, allows us, fifteen years later, to measure its breadth and its—let's say the word, even though it would seem repugnant to this "common man"—originality. It is perhaps because the idea to paint as each and every person could do is, in our society, neither natural nor "common" that Dubuffet had to wait until his fortieth year to—as he put it—*find an entrée* and dedicate himself definitively to the exercise of painting. In his forties, during the sad days of the Occupation, and hoping for a Liberation from which he himself was expecting "*something*."³ Doubtless he would have felt reluctant to clarify his thoughts on this point: but as *L'Avant-projet d'une conférence populaire* reminds us, the poets of the day dreamt of a language which was audible to all, and this painter of returning art *to the street*, painting for everyone, for the little informed passer-by.

This idea, which occupied him for a long time, had up to this point prohibited him from entering the exclusive world of avant-garde art, an art of the select few if ever there was one. Retracing the aesthetic disappointments of the young Dubuffet, Georges Limbour observed the estrangement he felt towards the established names. As if he had judged that the art of the

¹ Jean Dubuffet, "Notes pour les fins lettrés," in *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre* (Gallimard : Paris 1946), p. 99; Jean Dubuffet, Jean, "Notes for the Well-Read" (1945), trans. Joachim Neugroschel, in Mildred Glimcher, *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987): 85.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87. Glimcher, p. 82.

³ Jean Dubuffet, "Lettre à Jean Paulhan," *ibid.*, p. 138.

Cubists, the great iconoclasts of the time, was still situated within the perspective of the tradition which they denounced. He came of age while Picasso was paying homage to academicism; it was not working any longer “towards” the destruction of the art of the museums that mattered so much to him, but rather deliberately ignoring any tradition, and becoming grounded at once in the transcendence of art which Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, evoked without even knowing it. But if the portrait of *Lili au chapeau garni de cerises* [*Lili in the Hat Garnished with Cherries*] (1935), or similar paintings from the same time, are just flat images, without impact or virtue; doubtless this is less a question of the death of art and its “superannuation” than of its lack, its absence. In this way Dubuffet was measuring the difficulty of the task facing the artist today: to make a “humanist” work—“*and naturally that is what one wants*”⁴—without forgoing the spirit of radical contestation which constitutes the foundation of modern art.

It was necessary then for him to wait for the right moment to assign negation a new figure. A war, and about ten years, separate Lili’s portrait *Big Coaly Nude* and the first *Hautes Pâtes*, shown at René Drouin in 1946, from the aforementioned portrait of *Lili au chapeau*. These works—and those that followed (up until the series of *Portraits plus beaux qu’ils croient* in 1947)—have retained their power of provocation: and doubtless it is necessary that we can, even today, *doubt* some of them in order to understand the wager on which they were based, taking no notice of the labor of the painter and the subsequent development of his work, following the example of those critics who feared back then that such a mode of representation exempted him from any spirit of invention. Because it was indeed a wager made by the creator of the *Vues de Paris* [*Views of Paris*] and *Mirobolus, Macadam & Cie*. A wager on the aesthetic scope of means of representation and materials held as unworthy, and which he would be the first to use in a no longer occasional, but rather systematic and exclusive way: soils and white lead, clinker, tar mixed with grit, tow, shavings, scratches, incisions and scrapings, imprints and reliefs, which one will find precisely named in the invaluable working notes of the painter. A wager, more

⁴ “Notes . . .,” p. 68. Glimcher, p. 75.

adventurous still, on the effectiveness that the spectator would be able to recognize in these representations that are certainly barbaric, but also completely devoid of the picturesque (“*he knows that in having decided to believe in it, he soon really is going to believe in it*”⁵).

Make no mistake here: if Dubuffet appeals in this way to the spontaneity of the spectator, to his engagement, his work should not simply be taken as scandalous or provocative. If this work has critical value, it is in the sense that, from a Marxist perspective, revolutionary theory inaugurates a challenge to the established order to which the action of the proletariat is called to give real content. Because fortunately Dubuffet was not content with ignoring the aesthetic order or with denying it solely in principle: he became a painter from the moment that he set one order against another existing order, when he set against the tradition of museums a savage rhetoric which seemed to effectively negate it, attributing to forms the least socialized by art— *lumpen art* as Clement Greenberg described it so well —the aesthetic meaning which Céline had recognized in the spoken forms of language.⁶ It is in this literal sense that it is therefore necessary for us to understand the intention asserted by this painter to put art back in the street. And, indeed, how to escape the aristocratic circle of art? This preoccupation, since Goya, periodically surfaces in European art, and painters—Géricault, Courbet— sometimes believed that they could accomplish it by borrowing subjects from popular prints, and even some of their compositions, and by trying hard to confer upon the image the density of the painted material, to establish a communication between the art of salons and that of the peddler. But the print imagery itself offers for the most part only a reflection of aristocratic forms, currency of a culture which the superior classes elaborate for their own use and which they then aspire to impose on society as a whole. Compared to this, the paintings from the series *Mirobolus and Macadam & Cie.* seemed immediately subversive: because it was not a question, for the author of the *Prospectus*, of more

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81. Glimcher, p. 80.

⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Jean Dubuffet and ‘Art Brut’,” *Partisan Review* 16:3 (March 1949), 295-297; reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism (Vol. II)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 289-291.

widely opening up the reserved domain of art to the masses but, on the contrary, of rehabilitating the most common and disdained forms of expression, forbidden in the name of the art of museums, and to demonstrate their aesthetic reach: of *graffito*, for example, which was very fashionable at a time when, night after night, the walls of the city were covered with inscriptions that testified in man's favor.

This perhaps is the true meaning of the challenge of Art Brut preferred to, —as Dubuffet put it —“cultural arts;” a challenge which for many lies in the reservations that this art has often inspired, even in those who wished to defend it. But our task is not to lock Dubuffet into his origins, and I am not sure that our discussion gains anything from being conducted on the theoretical plane. Whether the idea to look for individuals allegedly “*unscathed by any artistic culture*” and forced to express themselves by, “*deriving everything from their own reserves,*” and “*reinventing the artistic operation in its entirety,*” is well founded or not, whether the “primitive” arts, the productions of children and madmen are, on the contrary, profoundly socialized and cultural, and whether art brut is, after all, more Meissonier than Dubuffet⁷ (and I could add, in spite of appearances, more the portrait of *Lili au chapeau* than the *Grand nu* [*Big Nude*] or the *Texturologies* series) it matters little once one admits that Dubuffet is interested in discovering, with full knowledge of the facts and with a creative perspective, new modes of appropriating reality. Doubtless, works from the “irregulars of art” presented by the Company of Art Brut inspired in him a certain tendency for Expressionism, for the most *brutal* and “naïve” transcription of intention. By claiming to recognize in the madman, the child, the visionary, and man in general, a common function, the function of art, *the same in all cases*,⁸ Dubuffet satisfied

⁷ André Berne-Joffroy, “L'exposition Jean Dubuffet,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* (May 1954).

⁸ Jean Dubuffet, “Our point of view on this question of the function of art is the same in all cases: there's no more an art of the insane than there is an art of dyspeptic people or the art of people with knee problems.” *L'art brut préféré aux arts culturels* (Paris, 1949). Dubuffet, “Art Brut Preferred to the Cultural Arts” (1949), trans. Joachim Neugroschel, in Mildred Glimcher, *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987): 104.

the demand for an art which was authentically that of man, and no longer the privilege of a certain group or class. A demand whose simultaneously historical and utopian character, which is to say the critical relationship it maintains with contemporary society, he did not underestimate. In interrogating the irregulars of art, Dubuffet connects with the Gauguin of the Marquesas Islands. But there is no longer any need, today, to flee to the antipodes of the globe to invent a *modern art*: this can very well be done in Paris, and even in Venice.

However, this same Dubuffet, who said at the time that he was afraid of nothing except ideas, is succumbing today to “*metaphysics*,” and this previously by nature obscurantist spirit gets carried away ever more easily.⁹ Georges Limbour warned us of it: “*This man was born a contrarian and all positions in art are reversible.*”¹⁰ In fact, from December 1959, when the *Geologist* was executed, Dubuffet’s work was to take a turn no longer as much social as it was philosophical (as he said himself about the *Grounds and Soils* and other *Landscape Tables* because “painting can be a subtle machine for conveying philosophy—but also to elaborate it”¹¹), while the choice of a new partner—one that was commensurate with his intentions—was necessary for him.

Dubuffet had been seeking this partner systematically—at least in its most apparent guise—, from the time of the *Haute Pâtes* series of 1946. And, here again, what could be more against the rules of tradition than this acquiescence to the powers of “chance,” to the fortuitous reactions of the absurd (and yet the most common), even hostile, materials? But such abandon was contrary to surrealist games: because representation did not arise, at least in the first of the *Haute Pâtes*, from a more or less automatic and spontaneous pictorial practice; the painter was

⁹ Jean Dubuffet, “Texturologies, Topographies,” *Les Lettres nouvelles* (April 22, 1959).

¹⁰ Georges Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte. L’art brut de Jean Dubuffet* (Paris: Pierre Matisse, 1953).

¹¹ Jean Dubuffet, *Peintures initiatiques d’Alfonso Ossorio* (Paris : Pierre Volante 1951), Translated by Richard Howard and published in Klaus Ottmann and Dorothy Kosinski, ed., *Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio and Dubuffet* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 115-128.

not waiting for images but, on the contrary, eager to put them to the test of the material: as in *Mister Macadam* in which, once finished, “*the sort of white crepe dough with which the person is thickly buttered, was, by its proximity to the tar, dyed the color of burnt bread like a used Meerschaum pipe.*”¹² To be sure, this recourse to the most lowly and unworthy of materials answered his parallel attempt to rehabilitate the least valued means of expression. Dubuffet forced us to distinguish between the aesthetic quality of the work and its value as a luxury object. But these unusual ingredients still had the virtue of confounding the expectations of a painter even this highly respectful of their vague desires, their aspirations, and who wanted to see the emergence of the art of the material as much as that of the tool. It is remarkable that Dubuffet, as he progressed in his knowledge of the language of the various materials, recognized in their reactions, in their dialogue, an ever more decisive role, a deeper meaning. As if “chance” had soon appeared to him as the mask of an otherwise effective power. This same “chance” about which Valéry stated that it does not *do* anything in the world— except draw attention to itself, and Dubuffet said that there is no chance other than that which is led and provoked, or more or less “*consented to,*” taken advantage of by the artist.¹³

Chance intervenes every time that man, as in the game of heads or tails —attributes to apparently unpredictable objective processes a meaning that is foreign to them. But does this painter not seek natural order for aesthetic purposes, *expecting* from the material adventures pictorial effects that he would not have been able to produce, nor even conceive of, deliberately?¹⁴ Here is precisely, one might say, something that contradicts the very notion of art. Does this mean that Dubuffet relies on the most elementary mechanisms to decide on the

¹² Jean Dubuffet, “Indications descriptives,” in Michel Tapie, *Mirobolus, Macadam & Cie.* (Paris, 1946). Dubuffet, “More Modest,” (1946) trans. Joachim Neugroschel in *Tracks: A Journal of Artist’s Writings* 1:2 (Spring 1975): 26-29.

¹³ *Prospectus*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

elaboration of his paintings and the development of his work? Yet there's no need to exaggerate because the author of the *Haute Pâtes*, or *Texturologies*, the lithographer of the series of *Phénomènes* deploys, as far as I know, the most intense activity, which is also the most deliberate. It is true that his works always have an experimental appearance and that he himself even looks at them as so many preliminaries to his subsequent works (always put off until later).¹⁵ However, these experiments, and his ceaseless search for new techniques which bring into play the properties of the material—in the *Lacquer paintings*, for example, the incompatibility between oil painting and enamel paintings—, even (in the case of the *Imprints*) the properties of the support, have nothing arbitrary or gratuitous about them. And how can one continue to speak of chance when the painter no longer wonders at the aesthetic efficiency of natural productions but recognizes it, and claims to play with it; when he appeals deliberately, by means of the imprint, to the mineral kingdom and the vegetable kingdom? *Laboratory of forms, Natura Genitrix . . .* : a singular artist, this one, and freed from any cultural tradition in a different way than the primitive or the child (although one says gladly—but this is just an *image*—that Nature “imitates” art). And this same painter who, in a still life from 1923, strove to reproduce the veins of wood—as had been done by the Cubists, and previously by Munch or Gauguin, before obtaining their imprint (the *Spirit of the Woods*, etc.) twenty six years later is doubtless the first to have claimed, if not to compete with the pictorial production of butterflies, at least to be inspired by it, trying hard—having integrated it into some of his works, embellishing the background, with the paintbrush, with “*fine lines recalling those that the nervures [veins of a leaf] form*

¹⁵ Cf., Jean Dubuffet, “Mémoire sur le développement de mes travaux à partir de 1952,” in: *Catalogue de la rétrospective Jean Dubuffet* (Paris: Musée des Arts décoratifs, 1960), p. 163; “Memoir on the Development of My Work from 1952,” trans. Louise Varèse in Peter Seltz, *The Work of Jean Dubuffet* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962): 73-138.

spontaneously,” — to obtain by means of art the scintillating effects equivalent to those of his first assemblages of lepidopteran wings.¹⁶

The care that Dubuffet brings to working in the direction (and in the continuation) of natural processes—underlining and completing patiently with the paintbrush the networks of tiny folds provoked by the presence of hostile substances or transcribing with pen and ink the intimate organization of a fragment of ground, the passionate rigor with which he interrogates nature, of which his admirable text on the *Imprints* is, outside the works themselves, the most remarkable illustration, this is what gives a new direction to the intervention of “chance” in works of art. Because Dubuffet does not claim to understand the mechanism of these formations, nor even to form a “model” of it—a simple shift employed by the mind to imagine for itself the phenomena that belong to a different order—but only to collect the imprint of it; to observe its traces; proceeding with the greatest speed, “to let nature do here as she does elsewhere, and to learn from her in order to imitate her manners of operation.”¹⁷ *Transmutarsi nelle mente di natura*: if the program defined by Leonardo has not lost any of its current relevance, doubtless this is because it answers a permanent necessity of the mind that neither the development of the sciences nor the progression of ideas have succeeded in eliminating. As if the artist, following the example of the philosopher who is delighted at his plentiful and *flowery* beard, had to embrace passiveness in order to reveal to us that this apparently completely arbitrary and conventional activity, art, has its roots in the part of man that is not merely, in his being, a discontinuity but an integral part of nature.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93 and 110. Cf., Roger Caillois, *Méduse & Cie.* (Paris, 1960). On this point, he has already noted that what the wing is to the butterfly, painting is to man. Translated by George Ordish as *The Mask of Medusa* (New York: C.N. Potter, 1964).

¹⁷ Jean Dubuffet, “Empreintes,” *Les Lettres nouvelles* (April 1957), p. 513. Dubuffet, “Empreintes” (1957), trans. Lucy R. Lippard in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968): 606-616.

The idea of nature as a supplier of forms, and maybe as an artist, surfaces in mythology, which led painters and amateurs of the Renaissance to take an interest in “stones bearing images,” while naturalists classified marble according to their representational virtues: Florentine stones and marbles from Ferrara “specializing” in urban panoramas and landscapes of ruins, marbles from Sinai displaying plant representations, stones revealing religious images, marbles and jaspers in the form of *anthropomorphites*, *cynites*, *scombriformes* or *polymorphites*, oriental marbles embellished with whirlwinds of algae and shells “*that no painter’s hand could imitate.*”¹⁸ All the images that one has judged as *natura depicti* born from the coagulation of vapors and whirlwinds, from the petrification of fluids without ruling out divine intervention, or even the quite human intervention of the painter, who clarified forms and finished the work of nature (*ars adaptavit*)—aberrations; or—as Baltrusaitis put it—“*anamorphoses of the mind*”? But “*what exactly is an aberration?*” “*Does not all art begin with aberrations?*”¹⁹

As for the assemblages of “brut” elements, flints, roots, fragments of coal and scoria, which frequently appeared among the objects gathered by the Company of Art Brut, how not to evoke on this subject the introduction into their compositions by Baroque architects and decorators of feigned rocks, shells and vegetables, even of ropes and cork floats sculpted in stone? But if these practices give evidence of the same concern to put art to the test, to place it among the works of nature and men, the same distance separates the *Small Statues of Precarious Life* (1954) from the window of the Convent of Christ in Tomar, and the lithographic series of the *Phénomènes* from the stones covered in images dear to the scholars of the Renaissance. Because if the hand of the painter cannot imitate the “artistic” productions of nature, it seems that this hand was content for a long time to evoke the images in which man took pleasure, and the artist

¹⁸ Ulysse Aldrovandi (1522-1607), *Muséum Metallicum*, published in 1648; cf. Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Aberrations. Quatre Essais sur la légende des formes* (Paris, 1957); trans. Richard Miller, *Aberrations: An Essay on the Legend of Forms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

¹⁹ *Prospectus*, p. 56.

himself to reproduce his vegetable or mineral forms in the most *naturalistic* way. Instead Jean Dubuffet's works are a matter of an otherwise peculiar aberration.

It is, in fact, to a veritable conversion of the gaze and the fundamental structures of perception that the painter of *Topographies and Texturologies* (1957–1958)—but already that of the *Grounds and Soils* and *Landscaped Tables* (1951–1952)—invites us. Walking on the shores of the Mediterranean, the artist does not stop to pick up some shell and to dream, as Valéry did, of the mathematical, philosophic and aesthetic properties of its organization. Because his gaze is less attracted to these remarkable natural formations that are set free against an undifferentiated background than by this very ground and various hardly recognizable materials, roots, twigs, sponges (preferably the least regular and thus unsellable like the one used for the fragile *Grouloulou*). Valéry's *L'Homme et la Coquille* called for a continuation—the *Man and the Root*, the *Man and the Sponge*—, and this continuation is brought to us today by Jean Dubuffet's work.

The celebration of base materials was not only, for the apostle of art brut, a matter of taste, or even politics—by this I mean aesthetic or cultural (if I may use the term) politics. Because these materials—tars, soils, vegetal debris, and that food in vast supply on which the mind ruminates and which is regurgitated before digestion: the newspaper—interested him insofar as they establish the base of our daily life, and guarantee the continuance of this big broth “*which always has the same taste.*”²⁰ Any reflection is qualified by the choice of the object to which it applies itself, of its *pretext*—a piece of wax or shell, a sponge and an old wall: beyond the aesthetics which it suggests, such a choice reveals the perceptive attitude on which any authentic philosophy bases itself. If Valéry's philosophy was essentially a theory of attention, of the faculty that extracts from the text of the world and from the mind the most remarkable, the most deserving figures, indeed, of attention, then Dubuffet's philosophy resembles the phenomenology of perception in the painter's concern to put in brackets reflexive consciousness

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

and to restore at the same moment “*the fleeting phases of the inattentive gaze, what sights are projected onto whoever perceives them, and what he in turn projects onto them, what they reflect back to his gaze*”²¹—which means describing the perceptive field in a wild, native state. But Dubuffet does not stop there, and the program of which *Texturologies* is the outcome does not aim at anything less than to shake the essential structures of perception, starting with the elementary figure/ground relationship, without which one would not know how to speak of a “perceptive field” in the proper sense of the term. In truth, this preoccupation is not as new as it appears, and the adversity that *Mister Macadam* underwent—whereby the color of the ground contaminated that of the figure—curiously makes the link between the analytical experiments of the beginnings of Cubism and these works where Dubuffet tried to maintain the figure/ground relation in an essential ambiguity. But the painter of *Texturologies* knew how to bring this preoccupation to fruition. Because if the arts of the past offered us multiple divisions of the perceptive field, modern art often suggested, having knocked them around a bit, painting no longer *things* but—as the painter of *The Quay of Mists* put it—“*what there is behind things.*” It is this illusion of the “behind-worlds” that Dubuffet denounces tirelessly and his work—the least literary there is, and therefore made to entice men of letters—eventually boils down to the stubborn assertion that *behind things, and under figures, there is nothing but the ground.*

Tables which absorb little by little the glass and the bottle which the painter deposited on them, even the ham or a whole *Souper Riche* [*Rich Supper*]; landscaped figures, *Geographied Portraits* and those *Corps de Dames* (1950–1951) where the drawing does not confer on the figure any defined shape, but “*on the contrary, prevents the figure from taking this or that particular form*” and maintains it “*in a position of general concept and immateriality*”²²; cows endlessly infused by their meadows; *Monolithic Personages* (1955), torn away from the ground

²¹ Jean Dubuffet, “Apercervoir,” in Catalogue, p. 25-26. Dubuffet, “Perceiving,” in Glimcher,

²² Dubuffet, “Notes du peinture,” in Georges Limbour, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

by the application of newspapers to the still wet painting: *Cursory Places* (1957), where the painter maintains ambiguity between the accidents of the built up impasto and the representational traces; figures born from a gap in the landscape or from the *Terres radieuses* (1952), like an image caught in the web of a child's riddle; and up until those *Barbes* [Beards], which are like so many swarming carpets—the law which presided darkly over the succession of these always chancy enterprises appears in regard to *Topographies*, *Texturologies*, *Materiologies* and other *Routes and Roads*, continuous surfaces from which is excluded any idea of a center “from which would radiate or emerge organized composition.”²³

Georges Limbour sees in Dubuffet the Bard of the Soil: he discovered in the painter of *Grounds and Soils* this same movement of the mind which urged the pre-Socratic philosophers to recognize in one of the four elements the original principle of all things, the permanent *foundation* of all that is, and all that will be. But why the Earth, rather than the Air, Fire, or even Water which bathes it and renders it fertile? Why, if not because the Earth is *ground*, the base of our perceptions, the common place of our undertakings, the most constant foundation of our being. This idea, to paint the ground, to celebrate it—perhaps came to Dubuffet following the repeated stays that he took beginning in 1947 in El Goléa, on the fringes of the desert, where the sun discolors things until it returns them to the color of ground and reduces beings to the short-lived print they leave in the sand. But does this not link up, once again, with one of the most obstinate preoccupations of modern art, at least since Degas—and perhaps Goya?

It was again Valéry who observed, in the pages that he dedicated to Degas, that the notion of form is changed—if not called into question—by the projection on the vertical plane of the canvas the horizontal plane of the ground, which no longer acts then as a neutral and indifferent ground, but as an essential factor in our vision of things, and can—in the end—constitute the very subject of the painting. But the erection of the ground, and the dissolution of the forms which it inaugurates, does not only have a negative sense: the ground has to be wall and the wall has to be

²³ Dubuffet, “Mémoires,” p. 181-182. Selz,.

ground, so that from a surface which proposes to the eye nothing more than a pattern of distraction or serenity, everything is to begin again *with the gesture*. The *Wall of Soil* is the obstacle where pictorial doubt is abolished; the original foundation offered to the gesture by which man introduces into nature his representational order. Hasty, elementary draftsmanship, less a line than a trace, inscription of man in the sand or on the table, this *diligent partner* being nothing other, for the painter, than a “*raised ground*”²⁴: it seems that Dubuffet becomes attached, at quite the same moment, to restoring spontaneous impulses of the hand that elaborate signs and merge them with the accidents of the material, as if to persuade us better that this activity that so magisterially contradicts nature is for man the most natural thing, and that it is up to us to decide on the nature of the world at each instant.

Therefore the intention clearly asserted by the painter “*to find in the arrangement of (his) compositions a way to blur the vertical with the horizontal, to mix them or to establish in the painting a state of ambiguity between one and the other,*”²⁵ satisfies the double desire to force the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground seen from above and, at the same time, to establish the ground as a wall which calls for the intervention of man, by way of a line or an imprint. *Walls of the Soil* and *Feet of Grassy Walls* represent, in this way, the outcome of *Grounds and Soils*, where the impastoed surface of the ground rises vertically until it meets a horizon that is reduced, in the last canvases of the series (1952), to the dividing line between the two textures of which that of the clouds is not the least complex or laden. Still this painter affirms that he is pulled by two contradictory humors, one being “*interventionist*” and “*humanizing,*” to which impetuous drawings in the impastoed surface bear evidence, the other “*inhumanizing*” or metaphysical, which corresponds to the “*bracketing*” of the perceiving subject and culminates in these *landscapes without man*, devoid of centers of interest, and where painting

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

freed from drawing is reduced solely to the language of surfaces, and textures where the gaze can no longer find a place to anchor itself.²⁶ But these two humors, are they mutually exclusive? Does it not occur that they *overlap*, in the literal sense, in the same painting, as one sees by the transformation brought about between June and July, 1953 to certain of the *Beaten Pastes*—those canvases characterized by a line gouged, with the end of the palette knife, in a light-colored paste whose darker-colored underneath are revealed, having been covered, by means of a wide paintbrush touching them lightly, with monochrome tones which confer on the whole composition a shadowy and ambiguous texture?²⁷ Better still: are they not both complementary expressions of the same design, which is to bring the intellect to doubt his works and sentient forms in which it registers a “finished” image of itself, to invite it to go—as they say so aptly —*to the bottom of things* and, reconnecting its native relation with the world, to find, at the same time as the sense of finitude, a concern for its liberation? The artists of the last century considered the messy business of painting to be a part of their art that was certainly fascinating, but always a little bit shameful—and one which it was important in any case to hide from the spectator. Delacroix, while insisting on the necessity of making the material “rebellious” so that he could better conquer it, did not like to be caught in the middle of the “groping around” phase. As for Degas, he dreamed of the technique of fresco, which would have had freed him from the grinding required by oil painting and the preparing of *grounds*. In fact, Impressionism, and after it a considerable sector of modern art, developed as a function of the search for thoroughly legible pictorial means; but the asceticism of analytic Cubism did not have to resist the seductions of an art that Delacroix himself judged “*all the more close to the heart of man because it appears more material.*”²⁸ And the “messy business,” as one knows, has today rediscovered its place. However,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142-143.

²⁸ Eugène Delacroix, *Journal*, ed., Joubin, t. 1, p. 17.

because it belongs after all to each to decide on the relation that he maintains with the works, I shall say that there is no task more exciting for me than the one Dubuffet assigns explicitly to the spectator: “*The painting will not be looked at passively, not embraced all at once by an observer’s immediate gaze. But relived in its elaboration, remade by thought and if I dare say re-acted . . . All the gestures made by the painter, he feels them reproduced in him.*”²⁹ Does this *activity* not persuade us that art is a domain open to all and that indeed every man is a painter, even if he has never held a paintbrush or spread a color—to move in us the impulse toward pictorial expression?

Such a program supposes that all the means employed in the manufacture of the painting remain visible, and that the painter sacrifices nothing in search of the effect, which always implies some idea of dissimulation and surprise. Furthermore, Dubuffet sees here not merely a moral imperative, but—very concretely—the principle of an aesthetic. Because this painter assumes that entire aspect that painting endeavored, as I have said, to keep secret, in particular the grounds in which it is so rich. If Dubuffet hardly appreciates the use in painting of flat areas of color, it is because the observer of the *Underneath of the Capital (Métromanie, in 1943)*, and the geologist that he became afterward, likes working in *the thickness* of the ground—I mean of the painting—to reveal the underneath of it: to scratch the paper, to incise and to beat the impastoed material, to flay it, to whip it, to reveal its underlying layers, this is what gives him the greatest satisfaction, and it can be said of him in more than simply a metaphorical sense that he laid the landscape “bare.”³⁰ But what does this mean? That Dubuffet in turn would fall for the illusion of other-worlds? Is he not satisfied to have reached the *bottom*? Is it necessary for him to search even further—below the ground, to scratch down to the subsoil?

²⁹ Dubuffet, *Prospectus*, p. 75.

³⁰ Louis Parrot, *Jean Dubuffet* (Paris, 1944), p. 12.

This would be to underestimate the properly phenomenological intention that resides within this diligent reader of grounds and soils, routes and roads. Dubuffet stops at the epidermis of beings and the Earth in order to teach us to decipher their text, as far as the history which is retained in the network of its folds and wrinkles: from which originates the taste that he has for grounds and for faces marked by time, *historiated* with a “*profusion of tracks, signs and inscriptions.*”³¹ Just as aerial photographs reveal, under certain conditions, a registration in the geography of the traces of a human past that classic archaeology looked for in the depths of the ground, isn’t the consideration of surface features the point of departure for any geognosy—as it is even, so to speak, for any science of the “depths,” including psychology and sociology? But this is only true, and such steps are only fertile, as long as the observer does not linger in the analysis of his optical powers and that he recognizes in the strictly visual data a much more general meaning and value of information.

“I use my eyes less and less,” “art does not address the eyes”: such assertions can be surprising. Is modern art not, in principle, a culture of sight, an asceticism of the eye? However, the effort made by the Impressionists to imagine themselves in the conditions of “naïve” perception and to free the gaze from traditional rhetoric, that of the first Cubists to replace the poverty of the optical image with the profusion of the “profiles” under which things are offered to perception, these efforts which overlap with that of contemporary philosophy to reveal structures native to the perceptive experience, resulted curiously in a form of Scientism which amounted to its negation. The reduction of visual data to their physical constituents—color, light, the optical analysis of sensations and the elements of pictorial language, on which was based an essential part of research at the beginning of this century, contradicts one of the clearest tenets of phenomenology, namely that natural perception engages all the senses at the same moment and that each gives us access to the world in its unity and its sensorial plenitude. “*The eye perceives*

³¹ Jean Dubuffet, “Lettre à René Auberjonois,” (1945); *Prospectus*, p. 145.

what is hard and what is soft, what is porous and what is impervious, what is warm to the touch and what is cold.”³² If Dubuffet refuses for art to be a celebration *for the eyes*, it is because he places it at the originary level of sensation, before the distinction of senses, and because he assigns to the artist the job of systematically playing the keyboard of correspondences and synesthesia. Whence, among other things, his recourse to colors immediately suggestive of substances: sand and putty, dead leaves or the dregs of red wine. “*To paint is not to dye,*” Dubuffet says once again. And if it is true that there are strictly speaking no colors but only colored materials, and that the way in which these are applied matters more than their selection, one begins to understand that this painter is used to making the material “speak” while not letting us ignore the work of the hand: the kneading of the dough through which it reveals its *textures*.

Georges Limbour underlined Dubuffet’s indifference towards a problem that has long occupied painters, that of light. If the *Texturologies* and certain panels of the *Phénomènes* appear to contradict this assertion, it should be noted that phenomena of the light—brilliance, shadow, brightness, sparkling—hold the attention of the painter or the lithographer only to the extent that they are connected to the material textures, capable of being *shadowy and reddish*, as they are downy or cheese-textured, radiant and wet, pulverized, shimmering. Here again, in the distinction operated by reflexive analysis, Dubuffet sets the irrefutable evidence of naïve experience, which recognizes in color and brightness the primary qualities of bodies: and, in fact, the metallic shine of the *Substance of Stars* persists beyond the intermittence of the source of light which reveals its reflective properties. But the brightness of the metal, the softness of the down, the porosity or the coolness are not connected to the *figures* of things as such, and if the senses communicate between themselves, it is at a level where the intimate structure of beings prevails over their contour, where things are less known than perceived in their singular presence.

It was thus not a completely arbitrary decision that led Dubuffet to maintain the figure/ground relation in an ambiguity, in permanent indecision. By treating figures as so many

³² Jean Dubuffet, “L’auteur répond à quelques objections,” (1946) *Prospectus*, p. 115.

vaguely drawn grounds, whose texture he endeavors to decipher and—reciprocally—by directing his gaze towards the least differentiated ground to reveal within it secret figures and mechanisms, this painter has returned to the notion of form its original meaning, if it is true that form is not reducible to the precise outline of objects, but rather remains connected with the texture of things, that it appeals at the same time to all of our senses.³³

This painter is clearly a painter of *formlessness*, for as long as he persists in confusing form with its geometrical or graphic outline: does he not claim to free painting from drawing, to the point where he desires that “*the graphic system of the painting consist of nothing other than these limits between neighboring marks*” that arise from the interpretation of colored fluids?³⁴ To paint is not to dye, nor is it to draw: and how should we draw formlessness, asked Valéry; the formless, which is to say, those amorphic forms which “*find nothing in us which allows them to be recreated by an act of clear-cut tracing or recognition?*”³⁵ Now it is here, precisely, that the painter of the *Corps de Dames* and *Grounds and Soils* seizes the pen or the calamus and ink and seeks to restore, by means of line drawing, effects comparable to those produced by the triturations of the impastoed material and the physio-chemical reactions of its ingredients.

If Dubuffet’s drawings represent perhaps the most surprising part of his art, it is due to this contradiction in terms, as much as to the reflexive and critical function which the painter recognizes in graphic exercises: *exercises in the formless*, as Valéry would have said, and which teach us, among other things, “*not to confuse what one sees with what one believes what one is seeing.*”³⁶ Because it is indeed to make *intelligible* native structures of sensation and of form that Dubuffet applied himself in the *Radiant Earth* series (1952) and the textuological drawings,

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 265, trans. Kegan Paul, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962).

³⁴ Dubuffet, “Mémoires,” *Prospectus*, op. cit., p. 148.

³⁵ “Degas, danse, dessin,” in: *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, t. II, p. 1194). Paul Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morrisot*, trans. David Paul (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960): 36-47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1195.

where pictorial research is taken to its philosophic and aesthetic conclusions: “*From the point of view of technique, I liked there to be internal lines in objects, I mean that instead of circumscribing forms, they animate the insides of things—the inside of formless and non-delimited areas. They function as internal textures and not primarily as contours.*”³⁷ Dubuffet was to obtain equivalent effects with the *Imprint Assemblages* series: but, either because the juxtaposition of cut elements inevitably implies the idea of outline, or the technique of the imprint and the fantasies which it favors solicit all too openly an image-forming consciousness, it does not seem to me that these *assemblages*—I’m not speaking about his paintings—have an efficiency, a rigor comparable to those of *Radiant Earth*, in which Dubuffet took up, in a most *learned* way, the subject of networks and interlacings, thus satisfying the requirement—expressed by a Pollock in identical terms—for a surface which would not present centers of interest and where figures would remain prisoners of the texture of the ground.

The image as an “*accident of reading*”?³⁸ In order to perceive in the network of lines of the landscape the violinist and his dog or the lost traveler, do we not have to aim to figure the lacunae of the background? Elsewhere also, does the painter not expect the spectator to fill in the space of the painting, and finish it in some way, so he too, in turn, takes risks? But if he judges that the aggressive presence of the material means, by obliging the spectator to return ceaselessly from the image-forming consciousness [à la Sartre] to the perceptive consciousness [Merleau-Ponty], will increase the intensity and virulence of the images, it is nevertheless important to Dubuffet that these remain always problematic and vague, and that they offer the mind only a precarious refuge. By making any representation dependent on a system of necessities that are apparently foreign,³⁹ does he not aim to force thought to wonder about its perceptive past and its

³⁷ Dubuffet, *Catalogue*, p. 47.

³⁸ Daniel Cordier, *Les dessins de Jean Dubuffet* (Paris, 1960), trans. Cecily Mackworth, *The Drawings of Jean Dubuffet* (New York: George Braziller, 1960)

³⁹ Dubuffet, “Mémoire,” p. 141.

own genealogy? Doubtless the sense of uneasy gaiety which arises today from the presentation of his works in the museum has something in common with the emotion aroused in us by the sight of an antique statue exhumed from the sea floor, the slow work of marine nature having revealed the contradictory virtues of the stone, whose spiritual aspirations, whose sublimity were all the sculptor had been able to recognize in it. Hegel judged that the notion of form—in the classic sense of the term—corresponded to a past event in the relationship of the Mind with itself, when it obtained from the outlines of an external form the perceptible reflection of the Idea. But could the author of the *Aesthetics* foresee when he defined art as a *thing of the past*, that the Idea having reached the end-point of its progress, the mind would soon grow tired of contemplating it and would turn its attention to games, to the snares of the *Geologist*, that it would once more address art, not this time to raise it to the level of the Concept but, on the contrary, to reconnect with its original grounds and return through it to the text of the world?



1. Jean Dubuffet, *Lever de lune aux fantômes*, 1951.



2. Jean Dubuffet, *Paysage avec personnage*, ink, 1952.



3. Jean Dubuffet, *Lit de débris au pied du mur*, *Tableau d'assemblage*, October 1957

4. Jean Dubuffet, *Noble empire de l'herbe*, from *Assemblage d'empreintes*, February 1957.

5. Jean Dubuffet, *Jardin d'or et noir*, *Ailes de papillons*, August 1955.