Physiognomic Illegibility

JEAN DUBUFFET’S POSTWAR PORTRAITS

Kent Mitchell Minturn

From the summer of 1946 to the fall of 1947, Jean Dubuffet produced a series of comical, irreverent portraits depicting some of the most important literary figures of his day, including Antonin Artaud, Joë Bousquet, Marcel Jouhandeau, Henri Michaux, Jean Paulhan, Francis Ponge, and Jules Supervielle. While many of these individuals are not widely known by Anglo-American readers, at the time they constituted—to borrow the title of Gaëtan Picon’s canonical postwar study—a veritable Panorama of New French Literature. Some were former Résistant figures being lauded as heroes, while others were coming under fire in the postwar period for having contributed to German publications during the Occupation. Jean-Paul Sartre, for reasons that will become clear, represents perhaps the most conspicuous absence from Dubuffet’s panthéon. In October of 1947, Dubuffet exhibited his portraits in Paris at the Galerie René Drouin under the sardonic title, Les gens sont bien plus beaux qu’ils croient: vive leur vraie figure [People Are Much More Beautiful Than They Think: Long Live Their True Face].

According to most accounts, Dubuffet’s foray into the genre of portraiture was the direct result of the elaborate weekly lunches he attended, along with an array of other artists and literati, at the home of the wealthy American expatriate and patron of the arts, Florence Gould. Dubuffet himself seems to be the source of this oft-repeated origin story. In a letter to Gould dated August 4, 1946, he confesses, “What an adventure you have thrown me into! Nothing was farther from my thoughts than doing portraits! Now it’s all I think about . . . and it’s all your handiwork . . . .” In hindsight, however, Dubuffet’s statement to Gould rings hollow for two reasons. First, because portraiture was on the artist’s mind long before he began attending Gould’s lunches. Several academic and highly naturalistic portraits from Dubuffet’s prewar (or “pre-history,”

---

2 Jean Dubuffet, Les gens sont bien plus beaux qu’ils croient, Galerie René Drouin, Paris (October 7–31, 1947). The full title, as it appears on the poster announcing the show, includes the following line: Portraits à ressemblance cuite et confite dans la mémoire, à ressemblance éclatée dans la mémoire de M. Jean Dubuffet, peintre [Portrait likenesses cooked and preserved in memory, likenesses burst in the memory of Mr. Jean Dubuffet, painter].
FIG. 18 [LEFT]
Jean Dubuffet
Portrait de Georges Limbour [Portrait of Georges Limbour], 1920
Oil on canvas
21 7/8 x 18 7/8 inches (55 x 46 cm)
Collection Fondation Dubuffet, Paris

FIG. 19 [BELOW]
Jean Dubuffet
Masques (Robert Polguère, André Clauske, René Ponthier) [Masks], 1934
Paper mâché and paint
Each mask, approximately
9 7/8 x 6 1/8 inches (25 x 17 cm)
The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966
as he preferred to call it) period still exist—e.g., one of his father, Georges Dubuffet, 1919, another of his maternal Grandmother, 1919, and one of his lifelong friend, the surrealist novelist Georges Limbour, 1920 [Fig. 18]. During the thirties, Dubuffet coupled his interest in portraiture with his passion for theater and created life-sized paper maché portrait-masks of his friends René Ponthier (a local musician), André Claude (the manager of Dubuffet’s wine business), and Robert Polguère (an antique dealer), 1935 [Fig. 19], as well as whimsical puppets and portraits of his wife, Lili Carlu. And secondly, because in his statement to Gould cited above, Dubuffet fails to admit that his postwar portraits are closely related to the large number of anonymous figures and “personnages” he painted during the Occupation and in the months immediately following the Liberation, many of which were displayed at Mirobolus, Macadam, et Cie., his second solo show at the Galerie René Drouin in May of 1946. These earlier figures demonstrate Dubuffet’s interwar and immediate postwar interest in what might be called the illegible, immensurable, or de-standardized body—in short, the body that resists classicizing anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and anthropometry.

The Illegible, Immensurable, De-Standardized Body

Dubuffet’s rejection of the legible, standardized body is readily apparent in several paintings he finished just before he embarked on his Portraits series, including: Volonté de puissance [Will to Power], 1946 [Plate 9], and Archétypes [Archetypes], 1945 [Fig. 20]. In my estimation these heavily impastoed “haute pâte” [thick paste] works, which introduce base materials (e.g., sand, asphalt, and pebbles) into high art, are not simply attempts to shock, or to achieve succès de scandale, by returning figuration to a more “primitive” or infantile state (as many of Dubuffet’s early critics and detractors claimed). They also reflect, albeit negatively, an historically specific phenomena—namely, the classicizing “rappel à l’ordre” and nationalistic “retour à la terre” mentalities rampant in France at the time. Dubuffet’s writings from this period are replete with explicit and implicit denunciations of this return to classicism via the Renaissance. For instance in “Causette” [“Little Chat”], the text that he wrote to accompany his portrait show, Dubuffet lambastes this return of “Greekeries, post-Greekeries, and neo-Greekeries” in contemporary art, and elsewhere describes himself as staunchly “anti-Humanist.”


Jean Dubuffet
Volonté de puissance [Will to Power]
January 1946
Oil with pebbles, sand, glass, and rope on canvas
45 3/4 x 35 inches (116.2 x 88.9 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
(74.2076)

Jean Dubuffet
Archétypes [Archetypes], May 1945
Haute pâte on canvas
39 1/8 x 31 7/8 inches (100 x 81 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Arno Breker
Der Sieger [The Victor], 1939
These sentiments are expressed visually in Dubuffet’s *Volonté de puissance* [Will to Power], a painting from the *Mirobolus, Macadam, et Cie.* series, which not incidently takes its title from the Nietzschean phrase appropriated by the Third Reich. When juxtaposed with one of Nazi artist Arno Breker’s sculptures, *Der Sieger* [The Victor], 1939 [Fig. 21], which exemplifies the neo-classical body officially sanctioned by the Third Reich, and by extension Vichy, during the war, the target of Dubuffet’s attack becomes clear. The figure’s rough, hirsute body is the polar opposite of the polished, intact body depicted by Breker. In place of wholeness and perfection, Dubuffet presents us with a grotesquely flattened, disproportionate, and incomplete figure. It is difficult to discern if he is missing arms, or if they have been tied behind his back. Between the figure’s squat legs genitals dangle unceremoniously, like a cow’s udder.

*Macadam* connotes the idea of the horizontal vector of the ground, or, more precisely, an asphalt road, which is normally seen from above. Here that ground has been raised to a fronto-parallel viewing position. Dubuffet’s “return to the soil” is diametrically opposed to the Nazis’; it no longer takes the form of a glorified sublimated Teutonic body rooted in the soil of the German Motherland—or the French, Vichy equivalent, an autochthonous Greco-Roman Mediterranean body. Rather, Dubuffet’s return to the soil is nothing more than, as he put it at the time, “a rehabilitation of mud” for its own sake. Mud, soil, and sand are non-precious substances materially speaking, but also semantically; in Dubuffet’s hands they prevent his figures from taking on any higher symbolic value. Further, the opacity of these base materials block both visual penetration and interpretation, and undermine the observer’s attempts to read anything “into” the figures. At the same time, when viewing this painting, it is nearly impossible to miss the accidental “face” formed by the hair on the figure’s chest and abdomen. By including this detail, Dubuffet emphasizes the fact that faces are arbitrary, rather than transparent entrees into a figure’s true inner character. As is evinced by his later *objet trouvé* driftwood sculpture, *Le vieux de la plage* [The Old Man of the Beach], 1959 [PLATE 51], accidental faces continued to intrigue the artist throughout his career.

Dubuffet’s interwar and immediate postwar figures resist those classical Vitruvian ideals, passed down through the Renaissance and resuscitated in France after World War II, which seek to describe the human body as a perfectly proportioned, measurable, and quantifiable constant. In many ways, Dubuffet’s figures are the opposite of architect Le Corbusier’s contemporaneous neo-classicizing *Plan of the Modulor*, 1945 [Fig. 22], based on the time-honored Golden Section ratio of \(1:1.618\). Somewhat surprisingly, Dubuffet and the architect were friends at the time; the former gave the latter *Danseuse de corde* [Jump Roper], 1943 [PLATE 1], as a gift shortly after

---

he painted it.7 Dubuffet’s Archetypes nullify Le Corbusier’s “gold standard” of proportion and undermine the notion of the human figure as an ideal form or universally recognized sign. The viewer cannot help but ask: Of what are these figures archetypes? For what archetypical ideal do they stand? And, if they are generalized archetypes, why do they contain obvious particularities, such as the wrinkles around both figures’ eyes? This oscillation between the general and the particular will be a defining strategy of Dubuffet’s postwar portraits. Indeed, Dubuffet once admitted to Max Loreau, the scholar in charge of editing the artist’s multi-volume catalogue raisonné, that Archetypes was a direct predecessor to his Portraits series:

7 Le Corbusier wanted to purchase Danseuse de corde, but Dubuffet insisted on giving the painting to him: As the artist later explained (Prospectus, vol. IV, p. 486): “It seemed to me indecent to turn it into a business transaction. I was happy to give [my paintings] to those who loved them, I felt that giving them away for free was the only healthy way, and also the only way to protect my artistic freedom.” Le Corbusier, Dubuffet, and Jean Paulhan traveled together to Switzerland in the immediate postwar period. See Paulhan’s “Guide d’un petit voyage en Suisse au mois de juillet 1945,” in Les Cahiers de la Pléiade 1 (April 1946): 197–216. For more on Dubuffet and Corbusier’s shared interests see, Caroline Maniaque Benton, “In Search of Authenticity,” the first chapter of Le Corbusier and the Maisons Jaoul (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009): 28–77.

8 Jean Dubuffet, letter to Max Loreau dated June 29, 1963, reprinted in Prospectus II, pp. 374–375. Dubuffet says something very similar in “Causette”: “In portraits you need a lot of general, very little of specific. Usually there is too much specificity, always too much. For a portrait to really work well for me, I need for it to be hardly a portrait. Almost for it to no longer be a portrait. It is then that it begins working at full capacity. I like things carried to the extreme limits of what is possible.”
The word archetype evokes for me something like a simplistic generic prototype where any individual particularity is omitted. It should be noted that the first painting of my series Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie., done in 1945, carries the title Archetypes . . . This character of depersonalization is certainly a constant of all my personages . . . The charm of my Portraits enterprise consisted exactly in undergoing a treatment of depersonalization of the effigies of the persons designated. This persistent drive to depersonalize the persons seems to me to precede the paintings (and is more or less conscious in my mind throughout their execution). 8

Dubuffet was quick to add that his technique of depersonalization requires “imagination from the viewer to recognize and complete the portrait.” 9
Physiognomic Illegibility

“These pleasantries signify nothing.” — CRITIC MICHEL ARVILLE, 1947

Dubuffet’s postwar portraits, or “anti-portraits” as he preferred to call them, similarly resist typification, standardization, and legibility. His goal, he explicitly declared in 1947, was to “block any likeness,” and to “multiply the obstacles” between the viewer and the portrayed individual, in hopes that his effigies would remain “open to multiple interpretations.” “Those who have spoken about my Portraits as an endeavor of psychological penetration,” he claimed, “have understood nothing.”

Given Dubuffet’s stated goals, the crisis in legibility that accompanied his Portraits show at the Galerie René Drouin comes at no surprise. Contemporary critics were completely baffled, especially when discussing the role of mimesis in Dubuffet’s series. Their reactions range from one end of the spectrum to the other. Whereas one critic, René Guilly, felt Dubuffet’s portraits “resembled the living individuals too much,” another declared that the paintings “absolutely do not evoke the person represented.” Dubuffet’s sitters similarly had mixed reactions. Francis Ponge, for example, was pleasantly amused with his likeness, while Paul Léautaud, on the other hand, became so enraged upon seeing his effigy he attempted to destroy it with the end of his cane.

Yet, if we look at the critical reception as a whole there is one word that perennially resurfaces in the writings of detractors and supporters alike: “physiognomy.” Commonly understood, physiognomy refers to the art or pseudo-science of determining an individual’s temperament or character from his or her outward facial features. It presupposes that the face is a text or code which can be read or deciphered; as such, physiognomy can be thought of as a kind of applied semiotics of the body. Although the idea of physiognomy dates to antiquity, it was

10 Michel Arville, ici France, November 14, 1947, reviewing Dubuffet’s Portraits show.
12 The former quote can be found in René Guilly, Combat (October 8, 1947) “De portraits trop ressemblants font 22 victimes”; the latter in Jean-José’s review in Combat (October 16, 1947).
13 Guilly, op. cit., writes: “The only unhappy person: Paul Léautaud … who, even in his old age, clings to pretensions of beauty … apparently last night, at the Place Vendôme, he performed surgery on and demolished with a few strokes of his cane Léautaud sorcier peau-rouge or Léautaud griffures (Léautaud, Redskin-Sorcerer or Léautaud, Stabbed). Fortunately, he didn’t do much damage.” Before this, Léautaud had discouraged Dubuffet from publicly displaying the portraits. See Léautaud’s Journal littéraire (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964); specifically, the entry for November 21, 1946, p. 52, and Andrea Meier’s discussion of this in, “1946–1947: The Critical Portraits,” Chapter 4 of her doctoral dissertation, Dubuffet’s Decade (University of California, Berkeley, 2012): 159–209.
14 In addition to those articles listed above, see, René Barotte, “Jean Dubuffet, un enfant qui dure,” Libération (October 11, 1947).
not systematized and codified until the publication of Giovanni Battista Della Porta’s *Della Fisionomia dell’Uomo* in 1586; in the following centuries, Della Porta’s work was refined and augmented, most notably, by Charles Le Brun and Johann Caspar Lavater.15

While it might be argued that there is nothing inherently remarkable about the word “physiognomy” resurfacing in the critical literature surrounding Dubuffet’s show—it is, after all, a term inextricably intertwined with the genre—we should not lose sight of how loaded the word had become at this specific historical moment in postwar Europe. In the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the photographic travails of Alphonse Bertillon, Duchenne de Boulogne, and Francis Galton among others, physiognomy was elevated to the status of a positivist epistemology.16 And as the all-too-familiar story goes, 50 years later the Nazis hijacked the idea of “scientific” physiognomy, combined it with dubious notions about race and eugenics, or inherited characteristics, and used it for their own reprehensible ends.17 Dubuffet’s rejection

---

of physiognomy at this particular moment, then, should not be taken lightly, nor should it be treated as an isolated case. It is part of a wider phenomenon in postwar European painting that extends beyond the scope of this essay. Indeed, a more complete analysis of this issue would include a further consideration of postwar portraits by Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti, and those by Dubuffet’s friends, Jean Fautrier, Tal Coat, Henri Michaux, and Antonin Artaud, as well as an investigation into the profound role the human face played in postwar philosophical, literary, ethical, and cultural debates.18

Blocking Likeness

In his postwar Portraits, Dubuffet creates obstacles between the material signifier of the painting and the signified sitter in three main ways. First and foremost, Dubuffet blocks likeness by purposefully emphasizing the materiality and opacity of his painted surfaces. Physiognomic opacification in portraiture and the deconstruction of the genre’s monopoly on mimesis and verisimilitude via this strategy is nothing new in the history of modern art, in fact it very well may be an essential facet of it—we need look no further than Paul Cézanne’s portraits of his wife Mary-Hortense Fiquet, or Pablo Picasso’s 1906 Portrait of Gertrude Stein. Yet, Dubuffet clearly takes things much further with his heavily impastoed, monochromatic “pâte.” This “paste,” “dough,” or “pasta,” (as it can be alternately translated) acts like a culinary substance which engages senses other than the visual; the viewer must “devour” these paintings corporally, rather than look at them from a cerebrally-detached distance. Dubuffet encourages associations of this sort when, in the subtitle to his show, he describes his Portraits as “cuite et confite dans la mémoire” or “cooked and preserved in memory.” “Confite,” suggests conservation, but also something gelatinous, and non-transparent. Likewise, culinary metaphors pepper the artist’s introductory essay for the show. Critics, in turn, were inspired to use similar metaphors when commenting on his portraits.19

The French word for “material,” matière, can mean either the physical substance one would use to build something, or the “contents” or “subject matter” (as in the phrase Table des matières, a “Table of Contents”). At the formal level, Dubuffet conflates these two ideas so that the materiality of the paint confounds our attempts to look into the “contents” or “substance” of the depicted individual. To the same ends, through his painterly process Dubuffet combines the two meanings of the French word trait, which connotes both a mark, such as a brushstroke or a drawn line, and a feature of someone’s personality (in the same sense that the word is used in English to refer to a personality “trait”). In Dubuffet’s portraits the incised trait remains at one with the thick surface of the canvas, it no longer relates to any imagined internal characteristic.

Second, as in his earlier Archetypes, Dubuffet oscillates back and forth between the general and the particular. He includes the “accidental” and “insignificant” in order to cancel out any trait “others might quite rightly have judged more significant.” In each case Dubuffet begins with a very rudimentary plan, and then adds just enough information to suggest the individual identity of the sitter. For example, in Antonin Artaud aux houppes [Antonin Artaud with Tufts of Hair], 1947 [Fig. 24], he adds the actor’s recognizable wild tufts of hair and a careful line tracing his emaciated jawline, ruined by the electroshock therapy he received in a psychiatric hospital in Rodez during the war. This oscillation between general and particular prevents Dubuffet’s portraits from becoming “caricatures” or theatrical “masks” that aim to fix a face in time. As Benjamin Buchloh has observed, “. . . both caricature and mask conceive of a person’s physiognomy as fixed rather than a fluid field: in singling out particular traits, they reduce the infinity of differentiated facial expressions to a metonymic set.”

Lastly, in his portraits Dubuffet blocks likeness through a lively game of nominalism. The artist often claimed that the act of titling a work was itself an essential part of the artistic process, and once praised critic Renato Barilli for rightly stressing the nominaliste side of his overall enterprise. As Norman Bryson has argued, the practice of physiognomy traditionally relies on certain “syllogisms” which seek to embed it within common language and “naturalize”

---

21 The effect is best described by Michel Thévoz, in “Variations Physiognomiques: de Topper à Dubuffet,” Les Temps Modernes 258 (November 1967): 891–909. “The very troubling intensity of Dubuffet’s portraits is not the effect of an exact resemblance, but on the contrary, comes from extreme deformation, from a game of occultations which preserves the effigy on its apparition. The painting agitates like a mechanism of image variation which insidiously deforms physiognomy to the limits of denaturalization . . .” (p. 895).
otherwise tenuous connections, as can be seen in the “Similarities Between the Head of an Ox and a Man” illustration included in Charles Le Brun’s *Conférence sur l’expression générale et particulière*, 1688 [Fig. 25]. This kind of logic was unfortunately alive and well in France in the postwar period [Fig. 26]. In Dubuffet’s praxis, Michaux becomes a spider, René Bertele a wild cat, and Georges Limbour is equated to a crustacean or chicken droppings [PLATE 11]. However, in contrast to the example from Le Brun’s book, or the more recent page from a widely-read Parisian newspaper, Dubuffet’s animal-human connections are obviously contrived and over the top, and accordingly, strike the viewer as strange, unnatural, and even preposterous. He uses this effect of estrangement to emphasize the schism that exists between the painted portrait and the actual person. In the same manner, Dubuffet’s creative titling disrupts the genre of portraiture’s long-standing promise of illuminating a connection between the sitter’s image and his or her class, vocation, or ethnicity. For example, at one point, he nominates Paul Léautaud


25 Norman Bryson, “The Legible Body: Le Brun,” Chapter 2 of *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancienne Régime* (London and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 44. Bryson explains that these “physiognomic syllogisms” embed the comparisons within language itself so that “each kind of face intersects with a particular word: the lion with audacity, the rabbit, timidity, etc.”
FIG. 25 [ABOVE RIGHT]
Charles Le Brun (1619 – 1690)
“Similarities Between the Head of an Ox and a Man,”
from Livre de portraiture pour ceux qui commencent à dessiner
Engraving

FIG. 26 [ABOVE LEFT]
Newspaper illustration, “L’homme ne descend pas (seulement) du singe” [“Man Doesn’t Descend (Only) from Monkeys”], from France-Dimanche, 1950

PLATE 11 [LEFT]
Jean Dubuffet
Limbour façon fiente de poulet [Limbour Fashioned from Chicken Droppings], August 1946
Oil, pebbles, sand, plaster, coal, straw, and resin on wood fiberboard panel
43 1/8 x 34 1/4 inches (110 x 87.5 cm)
Private Collection
Dubuffet’s Subjects

In his aforementioned comments to Florence Gould, Dubuffet suggests that his sitters were chosen randomly or simply out of convenience, and that he decided to paint them because they, too, were in attendance at the hostess’ lunches. Again, we should take Dubuffet’s comments with a grain of salt given that several of the individuals who eventually make it into the artist’s portrait series never attended Gould’s lunches, and conversely, some who were actually there are purposefully excluded. In *Un Allemand à Paris, 1940–1944*, Gerhard Heller, the Nazi bureaucrat responsible for overseeing literary production in Paris during the Occupation, and a regular at Gould’s lunches, reminds us that Jean Cocteau, Ernst Jünger, and Jean Giraudoux were also present, yet Dubuffet apparently had no interest whatsoever in painting their portraits. And, it is worth noting, even though Dubuffet exhibited approximately 70 portraits at his Galerie René Drouin show, he did not paint 70 different people; rather, he repeatedly portrayed certain individuals over and over again. The artist, in other words, had his favorites, and these included: Antonin Artaud (1895–1948), the radical thespian and author who sought to liberate Western theater from the written script; the artist-writer Henri Michaux (1899–1984), who at the time was inventing illegible alphabets and developing a literature d’Aillers [*Elsewhere*]; and the prose poet, Francis Ponge (1899–1988), whose writings were based on the phenomenologically inspired descriptions of natural objects which led him to reject humanism and anthropocentrism and *Parti pris des choses* [*Take the Side of Things*].

26 Critics were not oblivious to Dubuffet’s strategy. See, for example, Michel Arnaud, “Visite à la ménagerie,” *Ici France* (November 14, 1947).

27 For further analysis of this, I would direct the reader to Stephanie Chadwick’s newly minted PhD dissertation, *Disorienting Forms: Jean Dubuffet, Portraiture, Ethnography* (Rice University, 2015).

Joë Bousquet (1897–1950) [Fig. 27, PLATE 12], another one of Dubuffet’s favorites, was not present at Gould’s luncheons. He could not be, as he had been bed-ridden in his home in Carcassonne, France, since May 27, 1918, when he was shot in the spine in World War I. He spent his days waiting for the world to come to him, writing his books, poems, letters, editing the literary review *Les Cahiers du Sud*, and smoking opium to ease his pain. His bedroom, considered one of the main centers of the intellectual Resistance in the South of France, became an important nexus, if not a salon, for artists and literary figures, including: Hans Bellmer, Max Ernst, Jean Fautrier, René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Paul Klee, André Masson, as well as André Gide, Jean Cassou, Paul Éluard, Julien Benda, Louis Aragon, Pierre Seghers, Jean Paulhan, Simone Weil, etc. Equally important, at the onset of the Occupation, during the summer and fall of 1940, Bousquet gave refuge to Gaston Gallimard, his editors, and the entire “Nouvelle Revue Française colony,” in his family home “L’Évêché” (the former bishop’s palace) in Villalier in the Aude department.30

If he is known at all today by Anglo-American readers, it is by way of a number of postmodern heavyweights who have been inspired by his writings and have claimed him as one of their own, including Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and the *Nouveau Romaniste* Alain Robbe-Grillet.31 These writers agree that Bousquet’s style is characterized by an intensely subjective and private point of view, yet, paradoxically, at the same time it also exhibits a persistant “effacement of self” and obfuscation of individual identity—a “death of the author” stance long before Roland Barthes theorized it.32

Contemporaries of Bousquet also recognized his genius. The formidable critic Maurice Blanchot, in his review of *Translated From Silence* (one of the books that appears on Bousquet’s bed in Dubuffet’s portrait), tacitly asks: What does it mean to translate silence, or isolation itself? It is an impossible task, similar to multiplying zeros, if one attempts to translate it, one still ends up with silence. Bousquet, Blanchot says, “leads like a blind man,” his writing “unveils us


PLATE 12 [RIGHT]
Jean Dubuffet
Joë Bousquet au lit [Joë Bousquet in Bed]. January 1947
Oil emulsion in water on canvas
57 1/8 x 44 7/8 inches (146.3 x 114 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund, 1961

FIG. 27 [BELOW]
Joë Bousquet at his home in Carcassone, France, 1946.
Photo by Denise Bellon.
rather than enlightening us, and corrupts the solemn unity of discourse.” His book is “entirely a work of images and words,” which “pushes away the truth from which it was born.” Blanchot concludes by describing Bousquet’s unique practice of writing as “contreécriture” (“againstwriting,” “counterwriting,” or “alternativewriting”).

Dubuffet was smitten by Bousquet’s genius early on. In a letter to his friend Jean Paulhan, written in April of 1944, he admits that he finds his writings “extremely moving” and “full of the smell of iodine and seaweed issuing forth from the sea of the human spirit.” Dubuffet went to visit Bousquet in Carcassonne in January of 1947 with the intention of painting his portrait. Keeping in mind Blanchot’s comments above, Dubuffet’s portrait of Joë Bousquet au lit [Joë Bousquet in Bed] is perhaps best described as “contre-peinture.” The viewer’s expectations are systematically challenged here; everything is reversed. The bed linens, which normally would be shown as white, are black. The contour of Bousquet’s figure is created not with drawn lines, but rather by scratching into the black ground until the white canvas underneath is revealed. Moreover it is made up of a series of palimpsestic traces, which resemble white lines on a blackboard and look as if they could be erased at any time. The effect is a kind of photographic negative, the inverse of the printed word on the white page. Traditional spacial codes are also inverted. The horizontal register of the bed is verticalized. Dubuffet does not position Bousquet as a kind of gisant figure atop the horizontal surface of his bed, but rather upright, directly in front of us. The composition conjures up a great French history painting, like Jacques-Louis David’s Death of Marat (1793), only to better undermine associations of this sort. Bousquet is bizarrely ahistorical, outside of time, and at once in the immediate present. To hammer home this point, Dubuffet also includes a “journal” on Bousquet’s bed. This could be either a personal diary or a newspaper (the word is the same in French). The entire composition is Bousquet’s bed, the center of his very private universe, which has nothing to do with the outside world, save for the number of scattered correspondences which suggests an exchange with a small circle of friends.

34 Blanchot, “Translated from Silence” (1943), in Faux Pas, p. 216.
36 For more on Dubuffet’s relationship with Bousquet see the two exhibition catalogs, Jean Dubuffet: Paysages du Mental Joë Bousquet (Carcassonne: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Carcassonne, 1998), and Pierre Cabanne, ed., La Chambre de Joe Bousquet: Enquête et écrits sur une collection (Marseille: André Dimanche Editeur, 2005).
37 I thank scholar Sarah Rich for pointing this out to me at The Museum of Modern Art’s Museum Research Consortium dedicated to Dubuffet’s oeuvre, January 23, 2014.
Anti-Sartrean Portraits?

“No response from . . . Sartre?” — DUBUFFET

In my estimation Dubuffet chose to focus on these individuals multiple times because their writings accomplish in literature precisely what he hoped to accomplish visually in the genre of portraiture. Just as these writers systematically problematize the logocentric contract—which can be summed up as “a word is the index of an idea”—Dubuffet’s portraits similarly deconstruct the physiognomic contract—i.e., “the face is the index of the sitter’s true person and inner character.” These authors’ writings emphasize semantic obscurity, just as Dubuffet’s portraits foreground physiognomic opacity and illegibility. In more historically-specific terms, these individuals produced literature in the postwar period that stands in opposition to, or as an alternative to, Jean-Paul Sartre’s call for littérature engagée [committed literature]—i.e., transparent, politically-engaged, journalistic reportage, which chronicled history-in-the-making. We might even go so far as to ask: to what extent do Dubuffet’s portraits of these individuals represent “uncommitted,” or anti-Sartrean, portraits?

The subject of portraiture surfaces frequently in Sartre’s literary and philosophical works. At the very least, we can say that Dubuffet’s paintings are opposed to Sartre’s famous definition in The Imaginary (1940) of the portrait as an analogon of the real, which has a putatively transparent relation to the person it represents. “Sartre,” as art historian Yve-Alain Bois has succinctly put it, “was not at all interested in the materiality of the signifier.” Dubuffet, and the writers he selected to depict, on the other hand, were. In 1939, Sartre published two essays on portraiture, “Official Portraits” and “Faces,” in the English-language journal Verve 5–6 (1939). In “Official Portraits,” he explains that portraits work to “produce unity between the prince and his subjects,” and in doing so, guarantee a person in power his official status. Moreover, Sartre adds that there is no place for “trickery, hounded uneasiness, and baseness” in the art of portraiture. In “Faces,” Sartre admits that while a face can be a thing, with material

properties, he emphasizes, “... the meaning of a face is to be visible transcendence. Everything else is of secondary importance. Too much flesh may clog up this transcendence.”

Dubuffet’s portraits, we can confidently say, are full of “baseness” and “trickery” and strive to “clog up” visible transcendence.

In the postwar period, Sartre again returns to the subject of portraiture. In *What Is Literature?* (1947) it is put to use as a powerful metaphor in his rallying cry for committed literature. Reacting against France’s tradition of art for art’s sake, or in his words, literature and painting “which is no longer legible,” Sartre equates the portraitist, who concentrates too much on the flesh of the face, and who turns the face into an object as opposed to a transparent window, to the uncommitted poet.

For Sartre a poet is someone who refuses to utilize language responsibly:

> Words for him compose a face of flesh, which represents rather than expresses meaning. And when the poet joins several of these microcosms together the case is like that of painters when they assemble their colors on the canvas. One might think that he is composing a sentence, but this is only what it appears to be. He is creating an object. The words-things are grouped by magical associations of fitness and incongruity, like colors and sounds. They attract, repel, and “burn” one another, and their association composes their veritable poetic unity that is the phrase-object.

Sartre wants words and portraits to express “meanings,” rather than succumb to “the opacity of things.”

43 Ibid., p. 65.
46 Ibid., p. 32.
47 Ibid., p. 34.
Dubuffet Reflecting Paulhan

“Paulhan has too many ideas, I’m intoxicated by his ideas . . .” —DUBUFFET

Dubuffet’s exhibition of opaque, materialistic, and illegible portraits in October of 1947 ultimately resonates with the postwar political situation in France, specifically, the debates surrounding the literary épuration, or “purge” of writers suspected of collaborating with the Germans during the Occupation. Jean Paulhan (1884–1968) [Fig. 28], writer, linguist, Chief Editor of La Nouvelle Revue Française, and Dubuffet’s most important supporter and early champion, put himself at the center of these debates.

Paulhan’s entire literary career was devoted to the exploration of what has been called the “duplicity of language.” From the 1920s onward, he celebrated the arbitrary nature of the sign, and questioned the putative transparency of language. In the postwar period he was invited to join the Comité National des Écrivains or CNE [The National Committee of Writers], the ad hoc group in charge of judging and punishing writers who had published in German newspapers.

A former resistance figure during the war with an impeccable pedigree, Paulhan surprised everyone when he pulled an about face, resigned from the CNE, and began to defend the collaborationist writer’s “right to error.”

In 1946, Paulhan founded the literary review Les Cahiers de la Pléiade in direct opposition to Sartre’s Les Temps Modernes and the philosopher’s call for committed literature. The inaugural issue of Les Cahiers de la Pléiade included a “presentation” by Paulhan, “Three Cheers for Uncommitted Literature,” in which he justifies the publication of “curious” and “apparently useless” texts by “unknown” writers. And he adds: “As will be apparent, Les Cahiers de la Pléiade deal, as unobtrusively as possible, with issues far more serious than the great social and national conflicts that people have lately tended to bore us with.” A few lines after this, he reminds readers: “it can easily happen that children or madmen or totally naïve or uneducated people will hit the bull’s-eye with their first shot or arrive straightaway at the sort of visionary work that we find so enchanting."

52 Ibid., pp. 49–51.
FIG. 28
Jean Dubuffet
Maast à crinière (portrait de Jean Paulhan) [Maast with a Lion’s Mane (Portrait of Jean Paulhan)], 1946
Acrylic and oil on Masonite
42 7/8 x 34 7/8 inches (108.9 x 88.9 cm)
In *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade*, Paulhan published works from collaborationist and non-collaborationist writers side-by-side, just as Dubuffet’s portrait show presented former *résistants* like Georges Limbour, Henri Calet, and Francis Ponge in the same light as writers coming under fire from the CNE, such as Marcel Jouhandeau, Pierre Benoit, and Charles-Albert Cingria ([plate 13]).

And Paulhan used *Les Cahiers de la Pléiade* to publish a series of articles against the excesses of the purge, which he eventually assembled and released as *De la Paille et du Grain* [*Of Chaff and Wheat*] (1948) and *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance* [*Letter to the Directors of the Resistance*] (1952). In his postwar writings, Paulhan concluded that the *épuration* was actually a *linguistic* crisis, and he argued for the separation of law and justice, letter and spirit, literature and politics, author and work. Paulhan stressed the fundamental separation between the author’s writings (his corpus) and his physical person (corps).

Dubuffet’s portrait of Paulhan, *Maast à crinière* (*portrait de Jean Paulhan*) [*Maast with a Lion’s Mane* (*Portrait of Jean Paulhan*)], 1946, (fig. 28), similarly creates a gap between the depicted person and the real-world referent through the opacity of the material and by calling him “Maast,” one of Paulhan’s *noms de plumes*, which ironically is borrowed from the name of the ancient Egyptian god of judgment. Paulhan’s body language is almost illegible. His hands, “mains overt” [with open hands] seem to signal generosity, the act of giving. At the same time, because his figure is imbued with a strange symmetry, wherein right and left are treated equally, Paulhan is apparently trapped in—to borrow from the title of Anne-Louise Milne’s recent book—“the extreme middle.”

His hands also suggest a moment of indecision, as if he could go either...
PLATE 13 [RIGHT]
Jean Dubuffet
Cingria blanc sur champ sombre
[Cingria, White against Dark Background], January 1947
Oil and mixed media on canvas
57 1/2 x 44 7/8 inches (146 x 114 cm)
Private Collection

FIG. 29 [BELOW]
Jean Dubuffet, poster for the exhibition, Portraits, on view at the Galerie René Drouin from October 7 – 31, 1947.
Dubuffet and Paulhan were extremely close at the time. In fact it was Paulhan who introduced him to Gould and her acquaintances. In November 1946, as he was preparing his portrait show, Dubuffet admitted to Paulhan: “I’m thinking a lot about your writing on the subject of portraits,” likely referring to the latter’s brilliant essay entitled, “Portrait of Montaigne,” which was published in *Verve* in 1939. On the surface Paulhan’s essay is a rejoinder to Montaigne’s essay, “Of Physiognomy” (1575), published nearly 400 years before; but in reality, it is a trenchant rebuttal of Sartre’s “Official Portraits” and “Faces” published earlier in the same New York-based journal. Paulhan’s goal, in contrast to Sartre’s, is “to confute the physiognomists.” The main problem with physiognomy, Paulhan contends, is in essence a linguistic one. Paulhan’s message is clear enough—just as we cannot assume a one-for-one connection between words and things, we cannot read a person’s true character by his face, or judge a writer by his writings.

Dubuffet initially asked Paulhan to write the introduction to his *Portraits* show. This never happened. The artist eventually wrote his own introduction for his show, but it takes the form of a spontaneous, inconsequential conversation with Maast. Further, he indirectly alludes to Paulhan’s text “On Physiognomy” several times and borrows metaphors, such as art as “daily bread,” the “face as landscape,” etc. This lends evidence to the fact that Dubuffet agreed wholeheartedly with Paulhan’s reasoning when it came to the purge, and helps explain why the artist painted a series of portraits that visually make a similar anti-Sartrean, and anti-CNE argument.

The brochure Dubuffet created for his portraits exhibition further mocks Sartre’s idea of committed literature, the primary example of which is journalistic reportage [Fig. 29]. It is presented as a fake newspaper that has nothing to do with current events, politics, or history in the making. Also it has no “currency” in the sense that it was not for sale, and it did not circulate. In a letter dated August 13, 1947, Dubuffet proudly tells Paulhan that he purposefully chose to print the brochure “on crappy paper . . . without any value.” The mock newspaper’s columns contain small hand-drawn reproductions of the portraits of the individuals Dubuffet

---


59 *Causette.* Translated in this catalog.

included in his exhibition. They become “original multiples,” to borrow a phrase later used by painter Jean Fautrier, and as a result their effigies are thrice removed from any real-world referents. In their conversion from physical portraits to reproductions on paper, they become counterfeit bills, without any economic or symbolic value. The portrait is no longer the gold standard of representation; it can no longer be taken at “face value.”

The Face of History

In her astute contextualization of Dubuffet’s portrait show, art historian Suzanne Cooke reminds us that in interwar and postwar France, painted portraits became synecdochically connected with the idea of the “face” of history itself. For example, in the catalog of an exhibition of French portraits from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century organized by the Galerie René Drouin in 1943, Louis Hourticq insisted on portraiture as the art of fixing not just an individual face, but the face of history—its manner, its character, and its soul—thereby preserving the continuity of civilization.

Dubuffet’s postwar portraits, as we have seen, react against this phenomenon, and cause us to realize that, at certain moments, the “face” of history is fluctuating rather than fixed, opaque rather than transparent, and therefore cannot be “read” in any traditional sense. Concomitantly, Dubuffet argues through visual means, just as Paulhan did through the written word, that a simple one-for-one relationship between the author and his work does not exist. Ultimately, Dubuffet’s portraits demonstrate that the postwar search in France for “writing degree zero,” and “year zero: faciality,” were two closely related pursuits.

---