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Jean Dubuffet and Hubert Damisch. 1966.
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Writings and Correspondence: 1961–1985

HUBERT DAMISCH AND JEAN DUBUFFET

This dossier comprises a selection of the correspondence between Hubert Damisch and Jean Dubuffet, as well as all the essays written by Damisch on Dubuffet until the artist's death, with two exceptions: "Jean Dubuffet, ou la lecture du monde," which is available online, and "Le véritable Robinson," which was published in a previous issue of October.¹ Furthermore, an essay written in the immediate aftermath of Dubuffet's death, "Entrée en matière," has been included in this anthology.

The original letters are in the Fondation Dubuffet, Paris, or in the personal archives of Hubert Damisch. Most are typed, but whenever one is handwritten, it is dutifully acknowledged. Words between < > signal a handwritten inscription (in a typed letter). Brackets signal an addition (a date, for example) made by the editor for clarity's sake. Unless otherwise indicated, it is the first published version of Damisch's essays that has been translated. The essays have been interspersed with the letters in chronological order.

The abbreviation PES refers to Damisch's edition, in four volumes, of Dubuffet's writings: Prospectus et tous écrits suivants (Paris: Gallimard). The first two volumes appeared in 1967, the latter two in 1995.

Damisch's essays were translated by Nicholas Huckle. The correspondence between Damisch and Dubuffet was translated by Molly Stevens, with the exception of the letter from the artist dated August 14, 1984, which was translated by Rosalind Krauss and previously published in October.

—Sophie Berrebi

1. "Dubuffet ou la lecture du monde" (*Art de France*, no. 2 [1962], pp. 337–46) was translated by Kent Minturn and Priya Wadhera, with revisions by Richard G. Elliott, under the title "Dubuffet or the Reading of the World." It was published in the e-journal *Art in Translation*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 299–316. "Le véritable Robinson" was translated by Rosalind Krauss and published under the title "Robinsonnades II: The Real Robinson" in *October* 85 (Summer 1998), pp. 29–40.

1. *Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

16 November, [1961]

Dear Sir,

Please accept my thanks for establishing—through Daniel Cordier—contact with me: that my “Dubuffet” has retained your attention,² *that* is what touches me deeply.

Why not admit to it? I didn’t dare hope. . . . One does not contemplate these kind of works for years with impunity: the leniency you show for my enterprise would prove that they are indeed the bedrock of philosophical exercise and grounds for communication.

The mistake was, perhaps, to have chosen a relatively official publication³ in which to write about you (a publication to which, please know, I have no ties . . .),⁴ but the endeavor amused me. What is most unexpected is that it was enough for me to speak of withdrawing the paper for it to immediately find its place in the issue from which it had been dismissed. It will therefore be published in a few days, but with which illustration?⁵ No matter, I do hope you will not be too angry with me.

Thank you again for your attention.

Very sincerely yours,
Hubert Damisch

Hubert Damisch
21 rue Michel Ange (16)
JAS 27 30

2. Dubuffet had learned a few months earlier, in a letter from Pierre Berès, then director of the publication *Art de France*, that the latter had commissioned Hubert Damisch to write “a study of about twenty pages” on the work of the artist (letter dated September 7, 1961). Having heard nothing further about this text, Dubuffet wrote to Berès on October 30: “I am somewhat concerned about Mr. Damisch’s article, which I was surprised had been elaborated—and sent to the printers—without a single exchange, and without me knowing anything about it beforehand. I wouldn’t object if it were an ordinary article, but this is—at least this is what I’ve understood—a small monograph meant to be a resource and a more in-depth explanation than the lean exhibition reviews in newspapers. . . . I therefore ask that you be willing to suspend use of the photographs sent as well as the color plates until I have had the chance to ascertain that Mr. Damisch’s article corresponds with my views.” (Correspondence Berès-Dubuffet, Fondation Dubuffet, Paris).

3. *Art de France: Revue annuelle de l’art ancien et moderne*, according to its editor-in-chief André Chastel, proposed for its first issue “to study archaic, classic and modern works of art with equal attention. . . . [F]rom the point of view adopted here, the ideal would be to deduce from history itself the necessary critical positions to interpret contemporary art . . . and the involvement of philosophers and poets, whose conceptual agility and verbal findings might loosen discourse and sharpen focus, will not be rejected.” Cited by Marie-Madeleine Gauthier, “D’*Art de France* à la *Revue de l’Art*,” *Revue de l’Art* 93 (1991), p. 38, n. 1.

4. Is this an allusion to André Chastel, or instead to the fact that a first version of “L’oeil et l’esprit” by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, under whom Damisch studied at the Sorbonne, was published in the first issue of *Art de France*, in January 1961, shortly before Merleau-Ponty’s death in March 1961?

5. Pierre Berès had asked Dubuffet for a color lithograph to illustrate Damisch’s article. Ultimately, the article would be published instead with black-and-white reproductions of Dubuffet’s work.

Jean Dubuffet. *Trois personnages*.
1961. © Fondation Dubuffet,
Paris/ARS, New York. 2015.

2. *Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

26 January [1962]

Dear Sir,

Art de France has now been released; even more “flawed” [*foireux*], to use your expression, than you imagined.⁶ As for our paper, it doesn’t look so bad, but it is riddled with a series of typographical errors that make me wonder about the current quality of objects said to be “luxury.” I do not know if these people have sent you a copy of the object in question. In any case, they promised me offprints. As soon as I’ve received those, I will phone you, under the pretext of bringing you a few. . . .

For I have not forgotten your welcome, and the fellows in “Cérémonie,” which every day arouse in me the desire to know the future development of your work.⁷ And I do hope that this text will also have one (a future development), and placed in a better publication.

As always, sincerely,

Hubert Damisch

6. Damisch’s essay “Dubuffet ou la lecture du monde” appeared in January 1962, and it is to this publication that the writer alludes in this letter. It is not included in the present anthology because, as noted in the introduction, an English translation is already available online.

7. Following Daniel Cordier’s introduction, Dubuffet and Damisch met at the end of 1961. According to Damisch, this meeting took place in the artist’s studio. In a note to his secretary dated December 10, 1961, Dubuffet specifies that he gave Hubert Damisch a gouache entitled *Huit personnages* (October 12, 1961). This work on paper served as a starting point “for the painting entitled *Cérémonie*, of which it is a polychrome enlargement” (*Cérémonie*, November 7–9, 1961), hence Damisch’s reference. Note from Dubuffet to his secretary, Fondation Dubuffet, Paris.

Dubuffet. La main dans le sac. 1961.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

3. Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Jean Dubuffet
114 bis rue de Vaugirard
Paris VI

Paris, 6 February [19]62

My dear friend,

Just to inform you that I am sending your address to Monsieur de Wilde.⁸
Enclosed you will find his own letter.⁹

Warmly,

Jean Dubuffet

I do see that what interests de Wilde is the process leading from the *Matériologies* to the *Paris Circus*¹⁰ series.

I had a long discussion yesterday with the brother of my friend Fourcade (who is a Sinologist and specialist in Chinese art)¹¹ about the two divergent directions of Asian paintings and ceramics, which sometimes are practiced in a vein that imitates nature (or its suggestion, if not imitation) (towards “tachism” with a penchant for patinas, kiln accidents, drips, etc.) [*marginal note*: with very discreet color] and then to the contrary, in a drastically anti-nature vein [*marginal note*: with clash of different colors], theatrical (Chinese popular art, paper cutouts, dragons, Tibetan masks, shadow theater, etc.).

(Chinese art, of course, still lays claim to refinement, more or less, whereas my own involvement is always against refinement.)

8. From 1946 to 1963, Edy de Wilde (1919–2005) was the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, where the exhibition *Jean Dubuffet: Grafiek* was held in 1960 (September 24–October 30). He then became head of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1963–1985). Two exhibitions devoted to Dubuffet would be mounted there under his leadership: *Jean Dubuffet: Tekeningen, Gouaches* (November 26, 1964–January 11, 1965) and *Jean Dubuffet* (June 11–August 28, 1966).

9. This letter has not been found. One can, however, surmise that, following the acquisition by the Van Abbemuseum of Dubuffet’s *La main dans le sac* (1961), de Wilde, a member of *Museumjournaal*’s editorial committee, was seeking a writer for an article on the artist’s work and asked for Dubuffet’s recommendation.

10. De Wilde’s interest can be explained by the fact that *La main dans le sac* is one of the first paintings of the *Paris Circus* series that followed the *Matériologies* and represents a sharp visual departure from it.

11. Dubuffet is referring to the Sinologist François Fourcade, whose book *La peinture murale de Touenhouang* (Paris, Éditions Cercle d’Art, 1962) had just been published.

4. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Paris, 31 May 1962

My dear Damisch,

I found your text¹² very masterly, and the views it unlocks on artistic creation pertinent and rich.

A thought came to my mind, which is, in order to quickly clarify the principal question raised by this text for the reader, a very emphatic title could be useful, something, for example, in the vein of: "Art sans oeuvre, oeuvre sans art, oeuvre d'art" [Art without work, work without art, work of art].¹³

Here below now are small remarks on certain details (in fact very minor details) that I am pointing out not at all so that you change your text in the least bit, but only for your personal information.

Page I¹⁴—I want to call your attention to the idea that the drawings in the series *Terres radieuses* are to be placed in the category of works where there comes into being the intention of denaturing things (through violently arbitrary interventions) rather than in the category of painting that aims to render things very present by reproducing in a very immediate way the forms and rhythms that appear in the natural elements. It is just that in the *Terres radieuses* I enjoyed applying my process of denaturing and arbitrary intervention not to figures or objects anymore but to themes that were the most ill-suited for such a process: vast stretches of empty fields or mostly undifferentiated landscape. And so the drawings from *Terres radieuses* are perhaps closer to the figures in the *Légendes* or the urban sites in *Paris Circus* than to the *Matériologies*, or even to some of the paintings in the series *Sols et terrains* from 1951 and 1952.

Page III—A similar spirit undeniably presides over *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* but, because of the change in technique between the former and the latter, I find it preferable to speak of them as forming two series, *Texturologies* and *Matériologies*, rather than compounding them into a single series with either name.

Page 5—The series *Hautes pâtes* (*Mirobolus*, *Macadam et Cie*) was started in 1945 and this is really the date it should be assigned (it is true that I continued into the first months of 1946 when the exhibition at the Galerie René Drouin was held).¹⁵

Page 6—You mention tar and gravel, slag, white lead, and you could also add: lime and cement. And plaster. And asphalt. For some paintings, I've even added dirt, which I brought back from car trips to the country (in that case, it became frankly vicious) but vicious it was already with the asphalt and bitumen, which I would go get on rue d'Alésia at the Société des mines de bitume et d'asphalte du centre, and melt in basins.

12. Dubuffet is most likely referring to the preliminary versions of a long text that would be reworked and then published in two parts: the first in the journal *XXème Siècle* in June 1962 as "Le réveil des images," and the other in *Museumjournaal* in October 1962. "Jean Dubuffet and Images' Awakening" and "Work, Art, Artwork" are reprinted here, nos. 6 and 8.

13. The title Damisch settled for ultimately is close to the ones suggested here by Dubuffet. See *infra* no. 8.

14. Damisch included the following passage (until "Page III") in a note in *PES*, vol. 2, p. 448.

15. The exhibition *Mirobolus*, *Macadam et Cie: Hautes pâtes par Jean Dubuffet* was on view from May 3 to June 1, 1946, at the Galerie René Drouin, Place Vendôme, in Paris.

Page 8¹⁶—It is true that it is in thinking about the way to represent the shop windows or rather the goods displayed in the shop windows that I was brought first to represent these things by multicolored elements with somewhat unexplicit form; then, after, to use these same elements in the service of figuration (hence the *Légendes*). Below, a note on this subject.

My wish is to render phantasmagorical the site evoked by the painting, and this can only be obtained by mixing more or less faithful elements with interventions that are arbitrary in character and aim at the unreal. I want my street to be crazy, I want my roads, shops, and buildings to enter into a mad dance, and to do so I deform and denature the contours and colors, but still while coming up against the difficulty by which if all elements were one after the other deformed and denatured with too much exaggeration, if in the end I left nothing with anything of its true figure, I would have, as a result, made the site that I meant to suggest, that I wanted to transform, totally disappear. There is no more dance when the dancer disappears. My concern is therefore—this is the question that is constantly raised when elaborating a painting—to test up until what point I can comfortably take the denaturing, beyond which the sites evoked would vanish. So in some of the paintings, in order to give back the necessary dose of likeness to shops that were rendered in too cavalier a manner, I represented the goods on display in a very explicit way (even exaggeratedly explicit); in other paintings, in which the shops seemed sufficiently present, I wanted instead to plunge the objects on display into a bath of indistinction [*marginal note*: “Le gredin prospère,” “L’eau dans le gaz”]. It is to this intention that respond the kinds of swarming magma—multicolored and like “opus incertum”—to which these objects are at times reduced, and to which after this I endeavored to reduce in turn—in other paintings—the figures themselves, which provoked the series of paintings to which I gave the name *Légendes*.

Warmly,
<Jean Dubuffet>

Dubuffet. *Gambadeuse d'asphalte*. 1945.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

16. Damisch included the following passage (until the end of the letter) in *PES*, vol. 2, pp. 482–83.

5. *Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 7 June 1962

Thank you my dear Damisch for your most recent communication. I admire how you do things with such great care and how you once again modified this text, which is now absolutely excellent.¹⁷ What you write about your search for information on the springs and roots of human life makes you seem graced with strong curiosity, and I would even think that I am like you in this respect and there are moments when I come to think that the principal motive of all my work in painting and the rest resides in avid curiosity. An untiring curiosity to seize upon the essence of these springs and roots you speak of, to apprehend them and to even consider them at leisure. To do what with? Nothing other than look at them, take pleasure in the fascination they exert. I think that fascination is the key to art. I have to say that I also think—in parenthesis—that fascination is the key to tastes, desires, aspirations, and consequently to life—not only in man, but also in animals.

I have often considered the work of art as directly plugged into the mind's mechanisms, in the same way that we are moved by diagrams in which the heart's pulsations directly inscribe their own movement. One can expect a painting to be more than a simple diagram: a sort of *imprint* that bears the trace of all the various movements of the mind (the latter having a much more complex functioning than the muscle of the heart). One must not lose sight of the fact that the mind does not cease to function in two different ways (which constantly mix together): receptor and emitter, an intaking pump and an ejecting pump. There are certainly works that especially expose the receptive function of the mind and others especially its emitting function. In my own paintings, there are also some of either of these two kinds, it being understood of course that the mind never stops emitting while it receives and vice versa, so that one can never isolate either one of these two mechanisms from the other. They are constantly mixing together, forming bizarre marriages, and about these marriages, and about the figures that these might outline in paintings, I am, I have to say, extremely curious. I do think that this is chiefly what I expect from a work of art: that moving and direct imprint it can convey of thought and of life. A kind of photogram. A work that conveys of man what the bird's or mouse's nest, or spider's web, conveys of its maker.

Very truly yours,
<Jean Dubuffet>

17. Damisch included the rest of this letter in *PES*, vol. 2, pp. 361–62.

6. Hubert Damisch, “Jean Dubuffet and the Awakening of Images” (1962)¹⁸

It should come as no surprise to us that Jean Dubuffet’s work, in turn, is currently finding its place today in Museums.¹⁹ But we should not go too far with this: the fact that a few of this painter’s productions are now annexed to the collective heritage does not signal a fundamental change in our relationship with his work. Such a consecration does not invalidate Dubuffet’s artistic project, going back to his first exhibition at the René Drouin Gallery in 1944, any more than it affects the position that he has ceaselessly claimed for his works since then. And the Museum itself, as welcoming as it is in regard to an artist who is so resolutely iconoclastic (but is this the word that best applies here?), fulfills no less its own function: under the surface of the relationship of ownership, this institution, an institution that is equivocal and a little to be feared, allows contemporary society to pretend that it can assimilate everything in the works of man, including the most distant and strange, and including those works that most evidently contradict its own order.

These observations have their importance if it is true that the series *Hautes pâtes* and *Texturologies*, *Corps de dames* or *Assemblages d’empreintes* do not so much consecrate the break with a tradition as they introduce a new notion of art and its functions. One will object that modern art did not have to wait for Dubuffet in order to contest the Museum aesthetic. I agree; but it seems to me that no other artist of this time has linked to such a great extent the development of his work to the criticism of the traditional forms and the traditional definition of art. His work belongs to those—so rare—that do not simply propose a vision, a new style, but that impose (as I have just said) a renewed conception of the tasks of the artist and of his role in society. In fact, the ambiguous success that Dubuffet’s works enjoy today is no doubt the most immediate sign that his work is forcing us to think, for the first time, right through the Hegelian theme of the “death of art,” or—to be more precise—of art as a *thing of the past*. This is a difficult and paradoxical theme: because the author of the *Aesthetics* was not so blind as to claim that art was bound to disappear from our life, recognizing only that it had lost its original “innocence” and “necessity,” and that it had ceased to satisfy the “highest” needs of the mind.²⁰ (Art, as Hegel made clear, is concerned today with itself, and its works are so many pretexts for us to question its function and to question the place that it occupies in our society; but it will not cease, for that, to develop and to *seek its perfection*.) We can see that art has lost its innocence and its

18. *XXème Siècle* 19 (June 1962), pp. 57–62.

19. The opening line of this article alludes perhaps to Dubuffet’s recent recognition by museums, centering on his first institutional retrospective in Paris, organized by François Mathey at the Musée des arts décoratifs (December 16, 1960–February 25, 1961). This was followed by *The Work of Jean Dubuffet* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 19–April 17, 1962). Organized by Peter Selz, this substantial retrospective then traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago (May 11–June 17, 1962) and to the Los Angeles County Museum (July 10–August 12, 1962).

20. Throughout this essay Damisch seems to be playing with the double sense of the word *esprit* in French: either “spirit” (when referring to Hegel’s *Geist*) or “mind” (when alluding to Merleau-Ponty’s *L’œil et l’esprit*). I have opted for the word “mind,” which is occasionally used (albeit capitalized) in translations of Hegel’s text.—Translator.

necessity from the fact that it is no longer possible for us to define it, nor even locate it or delimit it in any precise fashion. Dubuffet himself was not hiding at all that he was against a certain received notion of art (and of mind) by basing his first works on the systematic humiliation of the traditional means of painting—substance, color, drawing, if not the “subject” itself—and by paying attention to the productions of “outsider artists” [*irréguliers de l’art*], and by soliciting deliberately, after that, chance and eventually nature itself. But while Dadaism and its sequels were out to destroy the very idea of the work of art, Dubuffet did not in any way hold an attitude that was polemical and of pure negation. On the contrary, he claimed to develop a *work*—and a work carried out in the most rigorous way—based on the refusal and the refutation of aristocratic art forms and luxury values. This is true not only with respect to the public and the Museums, but it goes also for the mind itself. For Dubuffet chose to address, through the intermediary of the eye, that part of the mind²¹ that is not satisfied with finding in sensible forms the reflection of its most accomplished thoughts, but that wants to find rather what clashes with it, what sets it into movement, what informs it: a realm that is, in effect, close to that of ideas, and where the mind would recognize the image of its own secret textures—or again, to use the author’s very terms, the movement of ideas, their way of movement, what it is that subsists in them from the gesturing from which they proceed.

Dubuffet may well have given *de facto* pictorial force (as we say *de facto* legal force) to this project that is to appearances thoroughly intellectual (even if he aimed, in fact, to contest the mind in its most refined forms, and to recall to it that its essential needs are not necessarily, as Hegel would have it, to be counted among the “highest”). It remains, however, that we judge his work in terms of its own developments, and that now we have to make quite an effort to look at the tongue pullers and other asphalt gamblers of the *Mirobolus*, *Macadam et Cie* series as a viewer from 1946 could have done, by definition unaware of the ulterior course of the painter’s work and unaware, for example, of *Texturologies* or of *Terres radieuses*, where the theme of the wall and of graffiti were to undergo the development that we now know, these themes having been established as formal principles of what today we should call Jean Dubuffet’s aesthetic.

But the interesting thing about the first *Hautes pâtes*, their force of scandal and their very effectiveness, lies precisely in the suggestion of this passing from theme to the pictorial work. Because Dubuffet was already playing—but in a way that was less imperious, if not constraining—with the ambiguity that presides over the perception of a simple scarcely fleshed-out tracing on a wall adorned with a few figures. It was important to him, and important from then on, that the image should appear threatened, or at least fragile, derisory, and dubious; it mattered that the viewer should have to decide upon the work that had been proposed to him, and it mattered also that the viewer be given the illusion of having to constitute it as a work of art (and

21. An allusion to Merleau-Ponty, “L’oeil et l’esprit,” *Art de France* (January 1961).

therefore to define, in his turn and for his own account, what he was to understand by these terms). Certainly, yes, it was important that the choice be offered to the viewer either to see the painted image—painted, scratched, or incised—for itself or, alternatively, to ponder the underlying support, covered with tar mixed with gravel and tow, as he would have done an ordinary wall. In deliberately favoring this permanent oscillation between the perceptive attitude and the imaging attitude (an oscillation that is involved in the appreciation of any painting that is not strictly illusionistic), and in distinguishing them at the same time one from another in the most rigorous fashion, in passing incessantly from the fascination with the imaginary to the temptation of realism, or, if one will, *from image to painting* (and inversely), Dubuffet was aiming at nothing less than the very root of the interest that we have in these works, and at revealing that root. From the image crudely traced on the wall to the forms buried in the serried network of *Terres radieuses*, from the populated grounds to these *Matériologies* that afford no more field to the activity of the imagination, the painter will make his claim to have made us travel the entire space where eye and mind are at work: as if the quest for the image matched term for term the work of ideas, nourishing itself with the very thing that contradicts it; as if it were crucial, there as here, to come back always to the original text, the text of the world and of the mind.

So, is Dubuffet an iconoclast? I would say he is much rather a great awakener of ideas: He is a great awakener of images.

Dubuffet. Paysage avec deux personnages (Terre radieuse). 1952.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS,
New York 2015.

7. Postcard from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

[Postmark: Étaples, 2 August 1962]

Here I'm studying the chtimi language and the philosophy of *Solele dans l'eule*. I was quite enjoying frolicking in the cold wind like a valiant herring all these past weeks but now the weather is becoming hot in this late season, so I'm packing my bags and leaving these parts where the climate has gone awry to return to good old Paris.

8. Hubert Damisch, "Work, Art, Artwork" (1962)²²

We are today so set in our expectations, we the outside viewers of his work, that at each of his displays we expect the painter to show us novel tricks and turns, and we assume that he will provide proof of progress in skill and audacity. We scorn the already-seen and we are always on the lookout for the new turn, the artist as he turns, and we are quick to dismiss him with a few words if, by chance, he hesitates for a moment, gets himself tangled in his trappings, or if he falls from the heights. We are so eager for the new that we often give much less attention to the sidetrackings and backtrackings that make up a work. Better yet, the painter lending himself to this game, the very notion of a work (whether an isolated product or the entire production of an artist) appears, when applied to the art of our time, always more problematic, if not inadequate and illusory.

What is a *work*, in the dual meaning of this word, and what can we say of the work today in terms of its relationship to art? If we raise this question of the *work*, the new turn taken by Dubuffet proves that the work has not ceased to inhabit a man who appeared up to now to have as his principal concern the humiliation, in each of his productions, of the values traditionally associated with the idea of the work of art. And so how are we to understand, in effect, after his having spent a long time standing before old walls, and in the hollows of gardens and soils, that this famous tricks-and-turns showman has come back to his old game? After the long sequence from *Texturologies* to the last *Matériologies*, that saw the progressive elimination of the image and of figurative tracings, and that saw instead the foregrounding of grounds—walls and soils—treated in a way that was increasingly colorless and anonymous (if not ultimately "veristic"), after this series from which the human figure, and finally all traces of human intervention, were excluded, how are we to explain the abrupt appearance (after a short interruption devoted to musical research) of the colorful tumult of *Paris Circus*, the funambulist agitation of the city menagerie that Dubuffet has offered to us since

22. Published in Dutch as "De kunst, het werk, het kunstwerk," *Museumjournaal* 8, no. 4 (October 1962), pp. 82–89, this article is introduced by the following note: "Following the acquisition by the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum d'Eindhoven of the painting here reproduced Jean Dubuffet, *La main dans le sac*, 1961, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm." Text reprinted first in its original French version in the *Mercure de France* (January 1965), pp. 100–06, then in Hubert Damisch, *Ruptures/Cultures* (Paris: Minuit, 1976), pp. 177–83.

1961?²³ One thing is undeniable: the painter has gone back to his origins. These street acrobats, these legendary characters, these buses and their passengers, these sidewalks with their pedestrians, these streets and façades, they meet in our memory the asphalt gamblers of the series *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie*, the city riders of *Métromanie*,²⁴ and the obscure alleyways, the graffiti-covered façades, of the Occupied Paris that Dubuffet had wanted to explore and analyze.²⁵ It remains for us to judge this return to the sources, to appreciate the full range and import of this return. Is this a going-back—to be frank, a pure and simple regression—the painter having taken the position of the impossibility of going further on the path begun with *Texturologies*? Or, on the contrary, is this the point of departure of a new inquiry that would this time no longer aim at the texture of what is sensed, the secret depth in which our perceptions and our most fixed thoughts are inscribed, but rather at the human milieu itself, in its deep underpinnings, locations and business, places and meetings?

Dubuffet himself is happy to explain this oscillation from one pole to the other, and the alternating exchange of apparently contradictory intentions that we see so often in the development of his work, as the division of his mind into two opposed tendencies that by turns overtake him: one of these is “inhumanizing” and, he says, “metaphysical,” and the other is resolutely “interventionist” and “humanizing.” The first of these tendencies was to find its full expression in the consecutive series *Texturologies* and *Matériologies*, in these “landscapes without man,” in these “layers of wandering” or of “serenity” where painting is reduced to the language of surfaces and material textures, where the eye wanders in contemplation and where attention, claiming to isolate objects from the ground against which they are outlined, has no work to do. This tendency is “metaphysical” in that it disposes the mind to become conscious of its rootedness—and, so to speak, conscious of its prehistory and intimate geology—and it disposes the eye to take up again its original relationship with the Earth, with the undifferentiated ground that constitutes the underpinning of every one of our undertakings in perception and expression. But these raised pathways, these soils erected as walls, call irrepressibly for the intervention of the hand, for writing, for the tracing through which man takes his stand on his own account and undertakes to decide the world (while these places that are set aside give way, suddenly, to familiar locations; and the anonymous historiography of the Earth gives way to the noisy disorder of store

23. Dubuffet worked on the series *Paris Circus* in 1961 and 1962. A selection of works from this series was exhibited at the Daniel Cordier Gallery in the summer of 1962 (*Jean Dubuffet. Paris Circus*, June 7–July 31, 1962). Damisch’s “Paris Circus” is reprinted in this volume, no. 10.

24. An allusion to *La métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*, a book illustrated by Jean Paulhan and Jean Dubuffet, published by the authors, Paris, 1949.

25. Dubuffet made no secret of this return to his first works: He wrote, in a letter to Geneviève Bonnefoi, dated August 4, 1961 (*PES*, vol. 2, p. 479, n. 84), “I live now completely sequestered in my studio, and guess what I am doing: paintings in the very same manner and spirit as in 1943. After finishing *Matériologies*, I did a complete about-face, and I decided to start over again from the beginning in hopes of carrying further, and to better effect, all my old experiments.”

windows and signs, to the language of the City). It is an alternating exchange, as the painter makes clear, that recalls somewhat the dual orientation of Asian arts proceeding sometimes in the direction of an imitation of Nature, down to its most obscure procedures, and devoting themselves to technical research, to the chance ways of matter, and sometimes aiming, in a contrary direction, for spectacular and theatrical effect, giving themselves over to strikingly colored figuration, consciously comical, outside of all naturalism, if not outside of chance itself.

It is, in effect, satisfying to the mind to contrast the figures of the new series of *Légendes* with the papier-mâché and the vegetal or plastic substances of *Matériologies*. The figures of the new series are painted and even drawn with an evident concern for staging, and they are like the cutout papers, the cardboard dragons and masks, and the ceramics of Far East Asia. It is a fertile exchange, if we are to judge by Dubuffet's production over almost twenty years. But can we say that Dubuffet's *work*, such as it is offered to us up to today, is simply this ordered succession of contrary aspirations? Or again, can we ask, are these dispositions irreconcilable, are they the incessant comings and goings from one extreme to the other that bear witness to the instability of a dual "talent"? Do these sidetrackings, these unpredictable backtrackings, emerge as the necessary consequence of the division of this painter's activity into two divergent paths that would lead, each one of them and for its own part, to an impasse?

Impasse, cul-de-sac: these words come easily to the pen when we bring ourselves to judge the productions of the few artists of our time who have gone, as one says, the furthest. A judgment we might make if what counted were to never take a piece of research, or an idea, to its end, but to reserve for it, and at once to guarantee for oneself, a future, to create one's own margin of safety. Impasse, we might say, as if it were just a matter of pushing, as some have done, to the limits of the act of painting, if not of painting itself, and to spend some time there, and as if we could really speak of failure when a painter such as Dubuffet, after having placed himself deliberately in the *margin*, invites us to recognize in consequence that, if we look properly, the world is given to us in its entirety, that there is nothing to dream in it and that "behind things" there is nothing, nothing other than the *background*, walls or grounds, soils and textures. The greatness (we should not be afraid of using this word) of *Texturologies* and of *Matériologies* resides in the obstinacy that their author was able to bring to the denunciation of the myth of "worlds-behind-the-world" and the denunciation of the illusion that there are "things-behind-things." Dubuffet's philosophical intelligence resides in the fact that he has given the most striking, realistic, even veristic image of this impasse, of this cul-de-sac, where reflection must go if it is to be truly radical and to apply itself to perceptual data: a wall set at eye level.

In fact, *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* represent less a response to a particularly tenacious tendency in this painter than the necessary end point of an undertaking that had its source in *Hautes pâtes* of 1945, and that emerges itself as the necessary continuation of Dubuffet's first works, which were, as we know, relatively late

in coming.²⁶ And we can understand now how Dubuffet has not ceased to formulate insistently, through his entire production, the only question that really matters to us, the consumers of works of art: the question of the fate of the work, the question of the destiny of art today. Because this is what is really at issue, at least up to *Matériologies*; and, once again, the intelligence of this decidedly philosophical painter will have been to think that it could be possible to restore a meaning to the idea of a work and to the notion of art precisely by separating them, one from the other, by putting them both in turn into question, by putting them both in turn to the test.

Viollet-le-Duc, and one will be surprised perhaps to see him quoted here, said more or less that art appears in all its purity, in its *necessity*, only when the role of the execution is the most humble,²⁷ when the *making* is not enslaved to cultural and luxury values, and when fascination (which would thus be the defining property of art?) works without detours: in the way, for example, that a primitive daubs the entrance to his hut. This is a remarkable idea if one thinks of the date when it was expressed, a long time before the “discovery” of primitive arts and of art brut. Dubuffet, for his own part, has made sufficiently clear the difficulty he felt, up to an advanced age, in finding “The Starting” and in beginning to create a body of work, persuaded as he was that art is essentially something other than a party game reserved only for initiates, and that he had to struggle with it in its own media in order to find its source. We have only to reread the *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre* to take the measure of how far the humiliation of the traditional values of *trade*—on the basis of which people might seek to define the perspective of the work—was the unavoidable counterpart of the claim for an art that would be finally necessary and universal: as if Dubuffet had intended to make art subject to the most extreme interrogation in order to make it confess as to its land of origin. But earth is not here just a word, and this reading of things will have still another advantage, which is to make us recall that this painting, from its beginnings, was bound up with the earth, with the soil, and this is true right through to its composite ingredients of asphalt, tar and gravel, clinker, compost, lime, plaster, cement, etc. In such a way, therefore, that when the moment came for the artist to put in parentheses no longer this time the idea of a work but art itself, and to define for himself the conditions of a concerted and continuous creative activity (a preoccupation that translates the demands of the work understood as the end goal, the horizon of daily work), the move from the images of *Mirobolus* to the first landscapes, and soon to *Sols et terrains*, was to happen quite simply and smoothly—chance, if not nature, taking over and the Work emerging then for what it is, the guardian of the Earth; and

26. It was not until 1942 that Dubuffet, born in 1901, began to devote his energies exclusively to artistic production.

27. Damisch began at this time to become interested in Viollet-le-Duc. He was shortly afterwards to write an introduction to Viollet-le-Duc’s *L’architecture raisonnée* (Paris: Herman, 1964), in which he notes: “Did not Viollet-le-Duc understand that the envelope, that the art form, might appear as the simple consequence of the correct use of materials as a function of their intrinsic qualities?” (Damisch, “Introduction,” p. 22).

Dubuffet. *La vie sans l'homme III*. 1960.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

this not at all in abstract terms, as we might read it in Heidegger,²⁸ but on a totally concrete level, right there, on the wall.

The turn taken, as I was saying, by Dubuffet's recent work pushes me to suggest that this undertaking of methodical doubt might have found at least a provisional end point with *Matériologies*, and that the painter might now be at work on the reunification of the two terms that he had been so careful to separate: work and art. If it is true that the work has as its function to restore to us the Earth, to anchor us in Being, then it is the function of art, on the contrary, to open a world, to write the human story. Because the paintings in the *Paris Circus* series do not simply bear witness to the desire within the artist to go back to his first intentions (with the idea, perhaps, of deciding if he has or has not remained faithful to them

28. Damisch is alluding here and throughout this article to Heidegger's essay "On the Origin of the Work of Art," which he discovered when it came out in French translation in the collection *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962). Damisch underlines the importance that these Heidegger texts had for him at that time (interview with Damisch, March 9, 2015).

and to confer on his work some sort of cyclical unity that would indeed be typical of him). If he had first claimed to bring his works into the world as so many *explosives* whose satirical charge would be obvious to everyone, Dubuffet has, little by little, allowed himself to be taken by the world, and allowed himself to aspire only, it seems, to reabsorb the world into his work, abandoning himself to it in order to better ingest it, giving himself to its play in order to capture it in its turn and to fix it on the wall, just as he had done with the Earth. Now, this world that sees his return today is, we have said, the world of the city. This city is not, in the manner of the Tuscan painters of the Quattrocento, the ideal City discussed by theoreticians²⁹ and that will eventually perhaps be built (but where man will not necessarily find his place), but rather it is our Paris, resembling so strongly an earth with its landscapes, its sites, its walls, its localities, and, of course, its inhabitants and their business, their ways of being.

Man is now reintroduced explicitly into a work that was never completely unaware of him. Man's image is reintroduced, and, along with it, all the problems that we can qualify, simplifying things, as aesthetic: the problem of linear form, of "contour" (which Dubuffet had worked up to now to reject in principle), the problem of color, the problem of the relationship between figure and ground. In this respect, it is perhaps not uninteresting to cast some light on the genesis of the series called *Légendes*. In painting the city, its streets and façades, Dubuffet came up against a problem that was new for him, and this is the consequence of the prosperity of commerce. This was the problem of *store windows*. It was in reflecting upon the manner in which to represent store windows, in looking to see what he could exhibit there, that he first came to draw and then to paint these multicolored characters, creating a whole stock of them. This theme of the store window, which we must take literally since it is often a case here of watercolors or drawings destined to be placed under glass, echoes one of the painter's oldest preoccupations: unhappy as he was to have taken no part in the journey, to not be in the bus, but remaining always outside of the spectacle (and the bus, the automobile itself, flower of industry,³⁰ are very much, in their own way, so many store windows where we see exhibited a few more or less joyful examples of humanity). Still, this theme of the store window bears witness to the spirit of research in which Dubuffet pursues his work, research that excludes all recourse to chance (but not to improvisation) and that suggests the work of the entomologist. Because here, under glass, pinned to the canvas, to the paper, with arms, legs, and feet all splayed out but still quite alive, we have a few characteristic specimens of this same humanity that he will then insert, with such precaution and with such care, into the city hodgepodge, observing their behavior, their reactions, watching for their traces and

29. From the end of the 1950s, Damisch was to take a strong interest in the Italian Renaissance. His fascination for the ideal city surfaces in 1987 in the third part of *L'origine de la perspective* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987). Heidegger is not mentioned there; however, we can nonetheless see a connection between this title and the title of Heidegger's essay to which the essay alludes.

30. Damisch is referring to Dubuffet's painting *Automobile, fleur de l'industrie* of 1961.

their disappearance all the way to their reabsorption into the ground, in the heart of this great soup stock that tastes everywhere the same—"taste[s] of man"—in the words of the author of "Notes pour les fins-lettrés," that looks at us with globule *eyes* fully open. Here, doubt is demolished as Jean Dubuffet reaches the goal: to allow us to see the great spectacle of man, to celebrate the ceremony of *our* earth (a task where art and work come together and are perhaps reconcilable?). Dubuffet remains outside of the store window, at a suitable distance: the guardian of the work, the guardian of art, the guardian of Man.³¹

9. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

New York, 16 December 1963

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

My wife³² has written me from Paris, where she has just returned, to announce the arrival of a new production³³ from the rue de Rennes studios.³⁴ And so I can believe that the contact between us is not broken. I am delighted about it, and even before seeing the content of your parcel, I would like to thank you, very sincerely, from this faraway land to where I have strayed for a few months.³⁵ Not so faraway: the fact is that we will have seen a few fine Dubuffets, well placed, appreciated, recognized, and so much at home—paradoxically—in this incredible America that you know.³⁶ In Philadelphia, I was even reunited with *Midi sonne grelot*,³⁷ which had caught my eye during my first visit with you. Quite delightful.

I hope upon my return to Paris in January to be allowed to see the striped bathers³⁸ that Limbour³⁹ described to me, and perhaps to talk with you about my reflections and projects, in which you are not without a role. The problem is that

31. In the version of this text published in 1976 in *Ruptures/Cultures*, with Dubuffet having just begun a new series of works, the *Théâtres de mémoire*, Damisch transformed somewhat the last sentence of this text and added another sentence: ". . . at a suitable distance, as if he would be the guardian of the work, the guardian of art, the guardian of man (but let us not be too hasty to decide on this, even if the decision were to reassure us; for already this eminently *reversible* mind is looking elsewhere and following the paths of another method" (Damisch, *Ruptures/Cultures*, p. 183).

32. Annette Damisch (1925–1967).

33. According to the exchanges between Dubuffet and his secretary around this date, this "production" could be a copy of *Trémolo sur l'oeil*, a book illustrated by Dubuffet and printed on the artist's presses using the photolithographic process during the summer of 1963.

34. Between 1958 and 1966, Dubuffet rented a studio located at 149 rue de Rennes, in the sixth arrondissement in Paris, where he installed two printing presses for the realization of his series of lithographs called *Les phénomènes* (1958–62).

35. The recipient of a Focillon fellowship, Damisch spent three months at Yale University in 1963.

36. Dubuffet's work began to receive recognition in the United States during the 1940s, and the artist traveled there several times between October 1951 and April 1952, and again in February 1962.

37. Damisch probably saw *Midi sonne grelot* in a private collection in Haverford, Pennsylvania.

38. This could be Dubuffet's *Gardes du corps* (1943), which belonged to Georges Limbour at this time.

39. Georges Limbour (1900–1970), writer, poet, and childhood friend of Dubuffet's, was born in Le Havre, like the artist. He devoted several essays to Dubuffet's work.

of giving the appropriate form to reflections on the theme of the death of art, of art and of the work (and of art without work, of work without art); a form that could not be entirely one of a book.⁴⁰ Happy is the poet that I am not.

Your text was finally published in *Médiations*.⁴¹ . . . But now Ferrier⁴² has announced to me that he will stop, at least temporarily, the publication of the magazine, and I wonder if the text on *Paris Circus* will have the honor of being in the last issue. It would still need to be modified a bit, just to give it the look of eternity and to be able to publish it elsewhere, perhaps in the *Mercure*?⁴³

Very faithfully yours,

<Hubert Damisch>

HUBERT DAMISCH

<Berkeley College

Yale University

New Haven

Connect.>

10. Hubert Damisch, “Paris Circus” (1962)⁴⁴

Jean Dubuffet’s *Paris Circus*, on view for a few weeks now in the center of our capital city,⁴⁵ offers to its always rather dumbstruck viewers a series of showpieces that are the product of more than a year’s work from this painter. We should note right at the outset that these works, with their brightly clashing colors, correspond to a single concern on the part of the painter, a concern that he has moreover never tried to hide. One thing seems clear: in painting these streets, with their façades and sidewalks, these buses, these pedestrians frolicking and darting around on the asphalt, can we not say that Dubuffet returns here to his first inspiration, the one that presided over the series called *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie*, of 1945–1946? Yet this move from the last *Matériologies* to the first “Autobus” of the new series, and without any transition other than an interruption of a few weeks in

40. These themes are the ones developed in the essay “Le réveil des images” and “L’oeuvre, l’art, l’oeuvre d’art,” published in 1962. Damisch was perhaps considering republishing the latter in French, which had only been published in Dutch. The French version appeared in the *Mercure de France* in January 1965.

41. Jean Dubuffet, “Notes sur les lithographies par report d’assemblage et sur la suite des phénomènes,” *Médiations* 6 (Summer 1963), pp. 21–28. Text included in *PES*, vol. 2, pp 157–91.

42. Jean-Louis Ferrier (1926–2002), journalist and art critic, founded the publication *Médiations*, which he would head until it folded in 1964 (issue 7), and then the book series Bibliothèque Médiations, published by Éditions Denoël.

43. The *Mercure de France*, the literary magazine founded in 1672, has been part of Éditions Gallimard since 1958. It would print two articles by Damisch on Dubuffet in early 1965, the year the magazine ceased to be published.

44. “Paris Circus,” *XXème Siècle* 20 (December 1962), pp. 105–06; reprint. *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, vol. 19, “Paris Circus” (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965; Éditions de Minuit, 1989), p. 214.

45. The exhibition *Dubuffet: Paris Circus* took place six months earlier at the Daniel Cordier Gallery. The late date of this article is due to the biannual publication schedule of *XXème Siècle*.

the painter's work when he was, as we know, involved in musical experiments,⁴⁶ is evidence of a remarkable backtracking. Dubuffet's desire, here quite obvious, to close himself off against the promptings of matter and the spontaneous upwelling of images astonishes us in a painter who appeared before this to have had recourse systematically to the techniques of chance as the wellspring of his own creative activity. Not to mention that, in order to satisfy this concern for a deliberate composition of the figures, Dubuffet does not hesitate today to use color for itself, even contour, whose arbitrary character he had denounced in his previous research into the secret textures of places and substances because it was tied, as he saw it, to a narrow and completely conventional conception of the notion of form.

Strictly technical as they are, such observations (which anyone could make for themselves) must nonetheless guard against any too hasty interpretation of the break that has come in Dubuffet's work, and must guard against the idea of a "return to the source" in which a number of people might willingly see an avowal of failure on the part of the creator of *Matériologies*. After having claimed to go so far as to eliminate within undifferentiated textures and grounds all memory of the figures that haunted *Sols et terrains* and all traces of the intervention of the human hand, if Dubuffet is coming back now to a form of deliberately exacerbated figuration, is this not because the undertaking started with *Texturologies* was, in effect, destined to reach an impasse? If, however, we could grasp the mechanism, and the reasons behind that mechanism, for this sudden oscillation, which is not without precedent in his work, we would surely be able to see the relationship that unites these two contradictory aspirations. These two aspirations, one after the other, summon the painter in a genuinely dialectical relation (and not simply a relation of opposition or of contraposition). To sum it up quickly, I would say here just that these circus numbers, these turns that make up the program of *Paris Circus*, translate a new concern for equilibrium for Dubuffet. This is a willed and deliberate equilibrium, one that gives no room to chance and yet is still consciously precarious and open to attack. An equilibrium, we could say, between the aspiration that is "humanizing," "interventionist," and *imaging* (we see this with full force in the figures that follow *Légendes*), and the "inhumanizing" and *metaphysical* aspiration that claims to turn the gaze away from the contemplation of forms so as to bring it to the anonymous ground that, never itself perceived or aimed at for itself, is nonetheless the underpinning and condition of each and every act of perception or imagination, and of all expressive endeavor. For the time is no longer one of reflection on what is given in perception, on the relationship of the figure to the ground and of ground to figure, on the problem of the inscription of human tracings in the Earth's great register, which is what Dubuffet's work comes down to in its

46. Following an invitation from Asger Jorn in December 1960, Dubuffet took part with him in improvisational musical sessions on various instruments ancient and modern and originating from various parts of the world. A first boxed set of recordings (six records, illustrated with original drawings by the artist) was published in 1961 by the Galleria del Cavallino à Venise. For more on this subject, see Sophie Duplaix and Sophie Webel, *Jean Dubuffet—Expériences musicales* (Paris: Fondation Dubuffet/NBC Editions, 2006).

systematic development from *Hautes pâtes* to *Matériologies*. Dubuffet is back in the city; he is among us. It is a city that has changed a lot since the days of the Occupation; it is a city that is prosperous and on the move, teeming with signs and store windows, cars and busy passersby. Always curious about places that speak of humanity, Dubuffet is seduced by the city as background, as ground, as a place where each and every one of our steps is written down and the figures of our business soon soaked up. But there is more: the painter does not open a window onto the city for us; quite the contrary, the city itself watches us, with eyes wide open, from the wall on which it is exhibited, like a store window. If it is a question here of the eyes of the city, it is in the sense, of course, in which we speak of *les yeux*⁴⁷ (the eyes) of a soup stock; and what is the city if it is not this great soup stock that we read about in the *Prospectus aux amateurs*: the great soup stock that has everywhere the same taste, the taste of man.

47. The expression *les yeux du bouillon* refers to the globules of fat that rise to the surface in a boiling broth.—Translator.

Dubuffet. *Le gredin prospère*. 1961.
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11. *Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 26 January 1964
 Monsieur Hubert Damisch
 Berkeley College
 Yale University, New Haven (Connecticut)
 U.S.A.

My dear friend,

It's good you mention the painting *Midi sonne grelot* because the staff working on my archives and cataloguing my works has just now alerted me precisely to the fact that they do not know where this painting is and thought it was in my possession.

Extraordinary that there you are over there, I didn't know. You will come back with things to tell us. Cordier must have known you are over there but I've hardly seen him these past months, and also Cordier never says anything, that's his way. My ties with him are broken, did you know?⁴⁸ His personality and pursuits, I little by little—and unfortunately belatedly—became aware, are of a whole other kind than he aims to have us believe—and which he succeeded, I must say, for a very long time to have me believe. Unbridled lucre and nothing more.⁴⁹

Your business about “the death of art” I do not find clear; I do not quite grasp to what it responds. It is however highly likely that the ideas you have about it are well supported, for you have been thinking about it for a long while and you are not a man to say pointless things. But is this not at base a question of poorly defined terminology? To you, is it not about certain forms of art that one would be wrong to deem alone worthy of receiving the name “art”? It seems to me that the impulse to create art has never ceased and will never cease to manifest itself in every human being, under all the different forms that it can adopt depending on the times and depending on the people—of course, it remains especially present and alive there where no one is considering acknowledging it or pronouncing its name. You know fully well that when things receive a name, it means they have already become rather cold and already do not much exist anymore.

Best of luck in America! Yours very truly,

<Jean Dubuffet>

48. Former Resistance member Daniel Cordier (1920–) was introduced to modern art when secretary for Jean Moulin from 1942 to 1943. He opened a gallery in Paris in 1956; then, with various associates, he briefly opened galleries in Frankfurt and New York, where he presented the work of Dubuffet, among others. He also devoted a book to Dubuffet's drawings (Daniel Cordier, *Les dessins de Jean Dubuffet* [Paris: Ditis, 1960]). Though he met Dubuffet in 1952, he became his dealer only in 1958 and showed his work repeatedly until they ended their relationship in January 1964. This was soon followed by the definitive closing of the gallery in June of that year.

49. The remaining portion of this letter is published in *PES*, vol. 2, note 95, pp. 496–97.

12. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

Monday, 20 July 1964

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

If our friend Barilli had not preceded me—with brilliance—in this profession,⁵⁰ I would have experienced some doubt, and concern, about accepting the honor (may I say) that you bestow upon me in asking me to preface the catalogue for the exhibition of the *Hourloupe* gouaches.⁵¹ Impossible, of course, to shirk this formidable task: and I cannot tell you the joy I feel at being once again associated with your enterprise, and by you: that same joy that came to me, in Venice, when I was by your side, among your friends, at the opening of *L'Hourloupe*.⁵²

Claude Bernard would like to have these few pages by the end of October, and even before. I hope to see you, probably at the end of the summer, to talk with you about these gouaches and about the proper way to use them, I mean: to present them. These gouaches, which I applaud myself for having studied with care, and which continue to astonish me for the new respect they demonstrate you have for traditional practices and mediums, and even for color. But, I imagine this to be only one aspect among others of what you call the assault on *verity*. And that is what I would like to speak about, if you deem this correct: the play of mirrors into which man is introduced, as in a labyrinth, and where he soon loses even the sense of his own identity. All of it through the very means that art was employing until now to represent him, *situate* him, and therefore reassure him, fortify him in his own fact. . . .

I will spend the entire month of August in Paris, working to salvage something of a disrupted year. Perhaps we will go away for a few days in September. I would be happy to hear from you, and perhaps receive some information on the objects occupying you now. I did not thank you for sending the first issue of *L'Art Brut*,⁵³ it's that, aside from "Le lambris de Clément," which I read in the *Mercure*,⁵⁴ I have not had the pleasure of studying this compilation, the highly scientific aspect of which does not go without impressing me; another task, for reflection, that I reserve for a not so distant future; a way to keep myself awake?

My best wishes to Madame Dubuffet;⁵⁵ and faithfully yours,

<Hubert Damisch>

50. Critic and art historian Renato Barilli (1935–) had recently published a monograph on Dubuffet: *Dubuffet Materiologo* (Bologna: Alfa, 1962) (1963 for the French translation).

51. The text in question was to be for the exhibition catalogue of the *Hourloupe* gouaches, which would be on view the following December at the Galerie Claude Bernard.

52. Dubuffet invited Damisch and his wife Annette to attend the opening in Venice of the exhibition *L'Hourloupe*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, June 15–September 13, 1964.

53. *L'Art Brut* is not in the strict sense a periodical. It is a collection of *cahiers* or *fascicules* (both terms are used by Dubuffet), each dedicated to a single *art brut* artist. It was published by the second Compagnie de l'Art Brut, founded by Dubuffet in 1962, when the *art brut* collection returned from the United States. The first volume, which was published in 1964, included the text "Le lambris de Clément," among others.

54. Jean Dubuffet, "Le lambris de Clément," *Mercure de France* 1207 (May 1964), pp. 18–36. Included in *PES*, vol. 1, pp. 244–61.

55. Emilie Carlu (1902–1988), known as Lili, married Jean Dubuffet in 1937.

13. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Le Touquet, 26 July 1964

My dear Hubert Damisch,

I seem to remember you telling me, on the plane,⁵⁶ that you had been taking notes and that you had in mind to write something on these *Hourloupe* paintings, and that is why I suggested to Claude Bernard Haim that he contact you about this introduction for the catalogue for the exhibition of gouaches, which will be held at his gallery next December.⁵⁷ From what I understood, he intends to give some luster to this exhibition and to the catalogue. But it mustn't be for you an insurmountable task. I'd be quite interested in a text by you; it makes me quite happy that you are planning to undertake it, and, of course, I will help you with it as much as I can, in the measure that I can do so and in the measure that I am in a position to do so.

Since you tell me you will stay in Paris in August, why don't you and Madame Damisch come and take a dip in Touquet, you can even go fishing for a shrimp or two and inspect the course of development of *L'Hourloupe*. You'll find typewriters, wheelbarrows, lamps and scales, boats and village squares. But in such a state! Hourlouped to the brim.

What fun, what a delight to hear you mention the "highly scientific aspect" of the issue of *L'Art Brut*. Oh yes! Highly scientific, that's what I love, that's what I wanted.

Very truly yours,

<Jean Dubuffet>

"Le Mirivis"

Allée des Chevreuils

Le Touquet (Pas-de-Calais)

Tel N° 6.86 in Touquet

14. Hubert Damisch, "Second Method" (1964)⁵⁸

When Descartes was past his great moment of doubt and convinced of his own existence, yet still fearing the tricks of a deceitful god or evil genius, he per-

56. Dubuffet is alluding to the Venice trip to which Damisch referred in the previous letter.

57. The exhibition *L'Hourloupe (Gouaches)* was on view at the Galerie Claude Bernard from December 8, 1964, to January 31, 1965.

58. "L'Hourloupe—Méthode seconde," exhibition catalogue for *L'Hourloupe (Gouaches)* (Paris: Galerie Claude Bernard, 1964). Reprinted in the *Mercure de France*, January 1965, pp. 107–13. Extract reprinted in the *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet, Fascicule XX, L'Hourloupe I* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966; reedition Fondation Dubuffet, 1995), pp. 193–94. English translation in *Art and Literature* (Lausanne) 11 (Winter 1967), pp. 145–50. Reprinted in Hubert Damisch, *Ruptures/Cultures*, pp. 183–89.

Dubuffet. *Machine à écrire I*. 1964.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

sueded himself, through reasoning, that the hats and coats that he saw in the street, as he looked down from his window, did not conceal ghosts or clockwork mannequins, but rather real men and women going about their business. These men and women, he thought, could perhaps also stand on their own balcony and wave to him.⁵⁹ This was a reasoning, no doubt, that made too quick an inference from appearances to reality: the perception and the recognition of the other, the recognition even of the image that the mirror sends back to us, are not matters of understanding or syllogism. The mind, if it intervenes here, claiming to justify, through inspection and by its deductions, certain obvious things

that everyone accepts immediately and without thinking too much, paralyzes practical life, beings and things, with its detours and with the multiple distances that it introduces between us and the world, making the practice of life impossible, muddling everything, mixing the true with the false, the certain with the improbable.

Perhaps this is the main task of all philosophy, its primary function. Still, if I refer here to the Descartes of the *Meditations* in connection with Dubuffet's latest works, the paintings and watercolors of the series called *L'Hourloupe*, it is, of course, because Dubuffet, who has always been fascinated by philosophical exercises, experiments, and investigations, recognized early on, and with his customary tenacity, that the spectacle of the street, with its movements and goings-on, was a theme and a ground that fit his reflections as perfectly as any other. Some will say that this is really because, after having spent so long at his own frightful and frankly tasteless concoctions, Dubuffet is now showing an unexpected respect for color and figure, for brushwork, for the material and medium, for oil

59. René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris, 1641).—Author.

or watercolor, canvas and paper. At the same time, they will say, he is showing a new concern for the clear and the distinct, and this allows him to be returned to the pleasing and so reassuring French tradition that he had claimed to flout. Descartes—wrongly more than rightly—appears here as both its most illustrious representative and its patron saint. However, I am not so sure that we should be so happy with this new scent of distinction (in all senses of the word), no more so than we should be too content with Descartes's effort to fix the mind in unsailable certainty. This distinction, and that certainty, and even more so the means and media that the painter must use in order to reach them, are of such an equivocal and daunting nature that we shall one day have to answer for them, if we can strengthen ourselves, and if we can accept to pay the price, a price that many will find too high.

Dubuffet. *L'algèbre des incertitudes*.
1964. © Fondation
Dubuffet, Paris/ARS,
New York 2015.

Dubuffet himself, in fact, with his usual candor, is warning us to not be so self-assured and to be on our guard, and we can see this in the titles that he gives to some of these works: *Le versant de l'erreur*, *Algèbre des incertitudes*, *L'administration des leures*, *Banques des équivoques*, *Théâtre des errements*, to mention just a few. But how are these works with these designed-to-disturb titles to be distinguished from other figurations where the identification, seemingly quite obvious, is explicitly confirmed by the artist: gendarmes and scooter riders, hunting scenes, car rides, loafers and wanderers of all sorts, cows, dogs, and mosquitoes, handcarts or little boats, village squares or streets of the capital city (this list is far from complete), and going as far as this, the so well-named *Donneur d'alarme*, who today picks up from the *Géologue* of the *Sols et terrains* series? Throughout the entire *Hourloupe* series, the painter makes use of the same means, and, at first sight, there is noth-

ing alarming about them. What we have are invented or phantasmic figures, often recognizable, made up of brightly colored or striped cellular elements that put them in a type of relief. These are then cut out and applied to a black or mottled background, against which they stand as so many silhouettes clearly individuated by their contours. The new function and the new importance that Dubuffet gives to drawing, to contour itself, have led him to break, at least in appearance, with his former researches, and to reduce down to their limit the strictly material elements of his representations. The texture of figures, and that of the backgrounds themselves, is here reduced at times to a fine layer of homogeneous color, at times also reduced to a few multicolored tracings, mottlings, and macklings, and still yet again—and this is the most immediately distinctive characteristic of the series—reduced to an arbitrary sequence of parallel stripes, distributed in a regular way over the space to be covered, within the area marked out by the line.

Does this mean that the uniformity of *means* creates an equivalence of *effect*? This is not at all the case, as we shall explain, and this is very much the reason why these images provide us with a pretext for meditation, in the same way as does Descartes's piece of wax. Pretext, and very soon text, if we are to look more closely. And what about the contour of these figures? When the painter sets himself to cut them out, literally and by means of scissors, he does so always at some distance from the contour as if he were intending to give the contour a kind of halo. We can see this halo around some of the characters applied to the darkened background, and thus each of these characters appears enclosed within his or her own space, a space that the character carries. Often, this space is reduced so much as to be hardly distinguishable from the outline itself. But this outline, does it not work also within the figures, and with the same spatial and distinctive properties, to isolate one from another the elements that compose these figures? Does the contour not also define, in opposition to the completely conventional treatment of the colored or striped cells, an unmarked network, so to speak, that emerges in the background, and, if we look closely, is this network not made up of the intervals that exist between these very cells, interlocked and connected as they are, like the pieces of a poorly calibrated puzzle? Again, what is a *texture* if not (to believe Littré) the interweaving of the parts that make up a body, such that the painter is free to use arabesque and interlacing,⁶⁰ even if in the strictly negative way that we see here, as a metaphor for matter, and to recognize its mark?

I do not know if this is exactly what Descartes meant when he concluded, from the metamorphoses of a piece of wax after he had successively exposed it to heat and cold, that matter is nothing but extension. For Dubuffet appears equally concerned to persuade us that extension itself and its figures are material, after their own fashion, as he is to prove that the distinctions that we make between figure and ground, between texture and space, between contour and matter, and,

60. Damisch had explored the question of interlacing in an article on Jackson Pollock that had appeared several years previously: "La figure et l'entrelacs" [Figure and interlacing], *Les Lettres Nouvelles* 33/34 (December 1959).

going so far as the identity that we accord to subjects and objects, beings and forms, that this identity and these distinctions are themselves entirely matters of convention. A useful convention, certainly, but one that, at certain moments and in certain conditions, turns against the purposes that it appears destined to serve. I understand now why it is that Dubuffet wanted me to begin this meditation in a room in a foreign hotel; this rather too luxurious room, with its too many mirrors skillfully arranged to provide multiple reflections.⁶¹ It is as if he wanted to persuade me with this very place that the ways and means of truth are also those of error, and that the deceitful god, the evil genius that Descartes sought to make the instrument of truth, does not ever cease, once invoked, to inhabit this certainty and to carry out his covert task, to *work* at certainty from the inside.

It is a commonplace to say that error is the condition of truth, but it is not a commonplace if we are to say that the means and instruments that the mind has to increase its powers are of such a nature and bind it in such a way that they condemn it to go astray within the very heart of the truths to which they provide access. At the beginning of the *Dioptrics*,⁶² when Descartes wrote that the inventions that serve to increase the power of sight (the sense that matters most to the conduct of life) are the most useful of all, he was certainly not thinking of the inventions of painting (no more than he was thinking of the inventions of philosophy), but rather of those wonderful telescopic lenses that allow us to perceive beings and objects, figures and forms, in ever greater numbers. Painting, it is said, enables us to see. Yet, although painting is in this way a sort of lens, and in the word *Houlloupe* we have *loupe* (magnifying glass), Dubuffet's real project is elsewhere. As he likes to reiterate, his is a project that is of a cerebral order and interest, but it is one that nonetheless touches upon sight (if it is true, following Descartes again, that it is not the eye but the soul that sees), and this project demands, for it to be properly understood, that we return for a moment to consider the image that the mirror sends back to us.

The means available to us to persuade ourselves of our own *identity* are not of such a great number that we can neglect any of them, neither the specular image nor the photographic or phonographic recording.⁶³ The moment at which the child begins to recognize his own image in the mirror, and thus accedes to a "superior" form of self-consciousness, is called by psychologists the "mirror stage" (a moment of recognition that we cannot be sure is beyond the power of any other

61. This could be the Gritti Palace, where Georges Limbour also stayed during the trip to Venice.

62. Through this allusion to René Descartes's essay on dioptrics (1637), Damisch appears to be engaging with Merleau-Ponty's *L'œil et l'esprit* (1964), the third chapter of which deals mainly with Descartes's essay.

63. There is a connection between the reference to photography here and the article "Cinq notes pour une phénoménologie de l'image photographique" [Five notes for a phenomenology of the photographic image], *L'Arc* 21 (Spring 1963), pp. 34–37, in which Damisch brings up, in particular, the paradoxical nature of the photographic image, "an image without thickness, without substance, and, if you will, completely 'unreal,' but that we cannot contemplate without having to resist the idea that it retains something of the reality from which it emerges, in a certain way, through its physio-chemical makeup."

animal). As for the function of the portrait in societies where this art form is highly valued, it corresponds in a certain way to the function of the mirror, since the portrait secures us in a certain image of ourselves. The portrait restores to us what is most alien and inaccessible: our *past* face, the face of the child, of the adolescent, of the adult that we were and that nothing can give us the power to recall if not by the external byways of images. I shall not here go into the difficulties encountered in the prolonged contemplation of our supposed reflection. These are difficulties that Descartes himself would have encountered if he had taken the time to inspect the evidence for the *I am, I exist*, on which he based his system. We have all learned to our cost that the mirror and the portrait itself do not fail to retain for themselves something of our individuality, and this leads us to question not so much the reality of the ego as its externality, the distance between myself and this image that is myself. Let the images contradict or complicate themselves a little, let the mirror double itself, and we are soon introduced into a series of equally troubling adventures that will suffice to persuade us (if we had need of persuasion) that the instrument of truth is also the instrument of error, and that, if we are not careful, the very same means that allow us to attain identity (and perhaps continuity) will quickly divest us of it.

I enter the room, and immediately the mirror placed in line with the door sends me back not the frontal image that I have every right to expect to see but my image from the back, a figure of myself that is unexpected, and grasped, just in the time of a glance, in a perspective such as to make me participate in the look that the *other* bears on me. This look is inattentive, fugitive; it is ruthless. Once again, the experience is a common one, but it needs only a few extra adjustments for the images to multiply to infinity and cover the entire space of the mirrors arranged in series. Now, it seems to me that it is precisely effects of this type that Dubuffet is aiming at when, by means that are identical to those that he uses to isolate the figures and to project them onto the screen, he is careful to “scramble” these figures so that they cannot be detached from the background, a background that is treated itself as a figure. These figures come to fill in the gaps in the background. They inhabit the fault lines until they become themselves nothing but fault lines and gaps, just like the faces and animals that are hidden in children’s puzzles. By contrast to the individuating principle that it was in the classical tradition, and although hypothetical or (as I was saying) unmarked, contour borrowed from the background becomes here the instrument of the final metamorphoses: instrument of the negation of forms and figures, of the *return to the background* of beings and things, as they lose all identity and all materiality while the screen is covered with the play of divergent bands and spans of clashing colors, associated and mixed, confused according to the rules of an algebra of uncertainty, of a logic of the improbable, and whose arcana have long been known to Dubuffet. But it should be obvious by now that Dubuffet’s new works, lucid and brilliant, intended by the painter for our use, and perhaps for our double or triple uses, persuade us of this: the certainties that we can reach might be such that the mind that settles

there quickly runs the greatest risk, that the work might be the instrument of doubt and reflection, and art not so much an *end* as a *means*, a tool in the service of truth and one that can on occasion turn against truth and attack it, like the evil genius whom Descartes was unable to keep in his place, and to keep satisfied with the functions assigned to him in the system. These works would be enough, I do not hesitate to say it, to secure Jean Dubuffet's place among the Founding Fathers.

Hubert Damisch

Vence, June 1964–Paris, October 1964

15. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

Tuesday 8 December [1964]

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

I am just taking leave of Georges Limbour with whom I went to visit *L'Hourloupe*: very attractive and labyrinthine presentation at Claude Bernard; drier and more austere at Jaeger,⁶⁴ but the paintings are active and resonant. To the point that here I am stumbling and rolling about, and above all convinced that I have expressed myself poorly: for it is not only that error inhabits verity, but that verity is itself but a delusion, about which one can only wonder why one would not prefer a tried-and-true aberration. So I wonder if it would not be appropriate to adjoin to the texts that the *Mercure*⁶⁵ will publish these few lines, which would come after "founding father" [*"père fondateur"*]:

"... Keeping in mind, conveniently, that time is short and that man will not have the opportunity to say everything, everything true and everything false, but only to proclaim *his* truth, *his* identity. And why not, instead, a tried-and-true aberration, deliberate, efficient? Why not—to finally speak like Nietzsche and not like Descartes—, why not, instead, the *not-true*? Why not incertitude? Why not ignorance?"

No need for you to respond, unless it is to reject the addition.⁶⁶ An addition that Limbour seemed to look rather kindly upon. . . .

We learned that you went to the shores of Africa: which huts, rugs, and lamb dishes do you have in your mind now?⁶⁷

64. Since 1947, Jean-François Jaeger had been the director of the Galerie Jeanne-Bucher in Paris, where the exhibition *Jean Dubuffet L'Hourloupe (Tableaux)* was held from December 8, 1964, to January 31, 1965, during the same time as the exhibition of the *L'Hourloupe* gouaches at the Galerie Claude Bernard.

65. The two texts in question are "Méthode seconde" and "L'oeuvre, l'art, l'oeuvre d'art," which at the time had not been published in French. They would be published together in the *Mercure de France* the following January.

66. Damisch added this passage at the end of the essay when it was reprinted in the *Mercure de France* shortly after the close of the exhibition at the Galerie Claude Bernard, in the catalogue of which it had first appeared. In a third version of the essay, published in *Ruptures/Cultures*, he would abandon the expression "*pères fondateurs*" and place the passage mentioned in this letter after "*triple emploi*" [triple use]. The essay concludes with these words: "Why not ignorance (but cultivated)?"

67. Dubuffet went to Tunisia at the end of November 1964.

Best wishes, and I hope to see you soon; and again, a small, modest and very respectful thank-you for bringing me into the great adventure that is *L'Hourloupe*, which has given me a great thrill and delight.
<Hubert Damisch>

16. *Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

[December 1964 or January 1965]

Monday

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

Having taken some time to persuade myself that it was a well-considered decision (but it was from the very start) and especially to convince myself that I was not overestimating my means and my strength, I believe I can commit to prepare, under your patronage (as Père Fondateur) and with your guidance, this critical edition of a highly scientific character that you wish to see published of your complete literary works, as well as of a reasoned selection of your correspondence: if, of course, these are still your intentions. And so here I am at your disposal. When you so wish, we can assess this honorific and also perilous task.

Yours,

Hubert Damisch

17. *Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 20 January 1965

My dear Damisch,

I am quite pleased about your decision. So off we go! Let's start as soon as possible.

It is of no use for me to go to the office with you. Miss Ursula Schmitt knows much better than I where things are and, much better than I could, will show them to you. I will tell her that you will be visiting one of these days. You will have, on the very premises, a little desk where you can comfortably work when you will need to.

It seems to me that it would be best for you to proceed first with a quiet and methodical reading of all the texts (there is a mostly complete chronological list in the *Cahiers du Collège de pataphysique*⁶⁸ devoted to my work: at least for the period up until 1960; and for after that, you will find at the office a file for the texts posterior to this date). All the texts are—printed, typed, and photocopied—at the office. You will therefore be able to read them there—and even, if you wish, take them in succession to your home to do so more at your leisure.

68. *Les cahiers du Collège de "pataphysique,"* published by the Collège de pataphysique, of which Dubuffet was a member between 1953 to 1966. In 1960, dossiers 10 and 11, titled *Le cosmorama de Jean Dubuffet*, was published.

You may find a few bits scattered here and there (like old letters of which I did not keep copies, because I never kept copies of my letters in the old days) that will later be good to collect, but this must be kept for the end.

Of course I remain at your full disposal should you need me to provide you with any information or clarification, and do not hesitate, I beg of you, to write or call me as often as you wish.

Now let's talk about the wheelbarrow. At the moment I was to send it to you, it didn't seem any good, it's not the right wheelbarrow for you.⁶⁹ So let's suspend the matter for just a while, either until I make (and I want to) another, more useful wheelbarrow soon, or until I find another, more satisfying one among the ones that belong to me (but I have to wait for the return of what is now on loan to the Galerie Claude Bernard for the exhibition).

Very truly yours.

18. Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

Sunday [October 1965]

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

Does he not look silly, today, the one whom life, the course of things, prompts to ration his resources with regard to the art of living (or of not living, suffering, dying): reflection doesn't quite know what to do with such elements of wisdom, such snippets, scattered and contradictory, perhaps even residual, and it is reluctant to put them in order. What meaning can still be credited to the idea of wisdom?

Here's a question for someone returning from Rome and Pompeii, and who likes to cite Seneca and practice art as he does life, recognizing in it the best terrain in which to experiment, to learn to make good use of oneself while exposing the self to an exigency that surpasses and denies it: for, of course, such a question only makes sense on the level of the self, its pretensions, identity, continuity, its aspirations and various claims.

A tough and good school yours is, in which the lessons are given in forms ever more friendly and warm (even exotic), and are a great comfort for us.

Yours,

Hubert Damisch

We await news of the trip and expect Lili to take advantage of Annette's offer to help.

19. Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

Monday [1966]

My dear and true Robinson (since this is also what I mean, you are now the *real* Robinson, the one able to break the defenses of culture), you'll find here,

69. Dubuffet had recently painted and drawn several works, as part of the *Hourloupe* series, with a wheelbarrow as subject, which he represented from the side or from above.

hastily typed, the few pages that were inserted into our preface like a foreign body, and which obstructed its course.⁷⁰ So read them (if you have the heart to, if you are not too absorbed—which you must be—by the making of your *pendules* [pendulums]⁷¹) as an introduction to this preface (which at present begins).

With great affection for you both,
H.D.

20. Postcard from Jean and Lili Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Sunday 9 October [1966]⁷²

Rather less satisfying than your view of Switzerland (but more virile, more papal) is this architectural celebration, sent with our tender thoughts.

J.D

We've arrived, but in such a state!

Hugs,

Lili

21. Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

17 November 1966

I do not want to bother your retreat, so necessary and indispensable after an escapade that left you weary.⁷³ It is true that prisoners should refuse to take any walks, good as they are only for tiring them out or intoxicating them: each remaining in his own cell. It is only that I worry that I have contributed to your irritation. You gave us a *vacation* that was indeed intoxicating; do not begrudge us for having taken advantage. It was a strange feeling to find Annette again, so alive and in this city where I left her, three years ago now, without knowing she was already tempted by the other side.⁷⁴

Even though the week seemed long to you, *L'Hourloupe* had to be seen in that museum,⁷⁵ in that country where it is perhaps a bit out of tune, like a strange society that doesn't respect the rules of the game or the language.

70. These "few pages" are probably the draft of the essay "Robinson," published a year later in *Tel Quel* 31 (Fall 1967, pp. 74–80). In it, Damisch proposes a new analysis of the Robinson Crusoe myth. Later reprinted in the volume *Ruptures/Cultures*, it was translated into English as "Robinsonnades I: The Allegory" by Rosalind Krauss in *October* 85.

71. Dubuffet made work entitled *Pendules* in April 1965, January 1966, and June 1966.

72. Postcard with a view of the EUR district in Rome.

73. The Damisches went to New York from November 6 to 14, 1966, where they joined Dubuffet, upon his invitation, for the opening of *Jean Dubuffet 1962–1966* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Georges Limbour, Lorenza Trucchi, and Lili Dubuffet also took part in this trip.

74. Annette Damisch had been suffering from cancer for a few years. Her physical state was better during this trip, causing Dubuffet to have suspicions about her true state of health. They grew distant afterward.

75. The Guggenheim exhibition notably included *Nunc Stans*, a monumental painting acquired by the museum (1965).

It seems to me that to have encountered again your paintings and “sculptures” in that city populated by light, portable structures whose transparency is but an illusion, and where clouds, the sky, and neighboring façades are captured, that it clarifies for me the meaning and function of your most recent works. They are, I heard you say, monuments that do not have an existence. Not that they are *virtual*, charged with a power that would just need to be activated: simple (?) delusions, as is attested by the disproportion between their volume and their weight and the colored network, sometimes loose, sometimes tight, filling the surface.

Monuments of nonexistence: one measures the course—the course of reflection, the course of invention, it’s all the same—traversed since *Texturologies* and *Matériologies*. For if material is power, it is ambiguous power: now caught in the trap of a discourse that no longer wishes to know textures but only text, those bodies seem to hesitate between the solid state and the gaseous state—precarious substrates on which the figures of logos are inscribed, without one being able to decide, material or text, which term is the agent of negation. These are, as you call them, *bornes de logos* [markers of logos]:⁷⁶ markers that lay out and create bound-

76. The *Bornes au logos* are one of the first series of sculptures by Dubuffet. Dating from 1966, they were sculpted in blocks of Styrofoam and then transferred into polyester resin.

Dubuffet. *Texturologie LII (pariétale mouchetée)*. 1958.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

aries; markers of memory, persistent simulacra—for how long?—of an existence that is *resolved* in language.

(Knowing how to say this, as you would like, without any artifice other than that of description: I will perhaps succeed. The schooling continues, at times harsh. But you are someone from whom one can accept lessons.)

We send warm wishes to both you and Lili, and all our affection,
Hubert D.

22. *Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

Wednesday 16 [1965 or 1966]⁷⁷

Dear and too great friend,

What to do, having listened to death for too long, when life sends you a sign and when one knows—I am not a man of many certitudes, but more of passions—that one will never forgive oneself for not having done *everything* to hear it and respond to it?

Remorse is worth more than regret: that is, for now, the entirety of my morality, temporary as it is, as is right and proper.

Yours,

H.

23. *Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 12 December 1966

My dear Damisch,

Of course not, not angry, why angry?⁷⁸ No reason. It's just that one must isolate oneself a bit, as you know, it's healthy.

What has always puzzled me about this preface is its doctoral tone. Well-written for sure, with regard to the genre itself; but entirely at odds with the values advocated in the texts presented.

Art founded on contradiction? The formula does not seem excellent to me. It is the habit of philosophy to arrive at these algebraic formulas that, by process of elimination, assimilation, and simplification, strongly impoverish things, if not distort them.

Perhaps a spirit of questioning (things generally accepted) would suit the creation of art more than a spirit of contradiction. A spirit that questions things that are commonly accepted seems, it's true—at least to someone less strongly attuned to it, to someone inclined to consider accepted things as irrefutable

77. The letter is filed between 1965 and 1966 in the Fondation Dubuffet archives. There are several Wednesday 16ths in 1965 and 1966.

78. There is no trace of any quarrel at that time in the correspondence. Either a letter is lost or the quarrel took place in person.

and refusing to call them into question—to simply be a (vicious) spirit of contradiction.

Refutation, in any case, would more properly clarify the position than contradiction.

Yours truly,

<Jean Dubuffet>

24. *Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

13 December 1966

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

A sane principle and active motive is that of *contradiction*: quite present is he who does not side with either life or death, but rather strives to hold both; who refuses to choose between high and low, but rather appreciates the contrast offered by their opposition; who (you yourself?) blows cold when hot is blowing, not that he likes tepidness, but rather the idea that hot should find itself reinforced by the contradiction brought to it by cold, and vice versa.

A sad state, a silly form is that of *refutation*: a form in which negation wishes to know nothing more of what it denies, nor even recognize it; the state of a doctor, attached to his position, who dons a robe and cowl when the butchers of the inquisition have long ago yielded to the central heating and air conditioning with which Museums and libraries are equipped.

What is bothersome about philosophy is that he who—out of repugnance, justified of course—refuses to make it an explicit profession is no less meant to practice one, although shamefully and cunningly. I agree that this is nothing to crow about, or to delight in, even if I prefer contradiction to refutation.

Yours,

<Hubert Damisch>

25. *Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

Paris, 12 January 1967

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

Ursula Schmitt has just announced to me that you have finally received the first proofs of your collected writings. She tells me I must contact Madame Duconget at Éditions Gallimard.⁷⁹ To tell you the truth, I do not quite know what to do, or how to be involved again in an endeavor that I seem to have carried out in a way that has ceased to please you. And it does not seem to me that a preface as opposed to as you say the values advocated in the texts presented (and it is quite true that if it were a matter of “values,” I can only be opposed)—that such a preface is right to introduce them. I never had on the subject other rights or other

79. Suzanne Duconget, head of the production department at Gallimard.

authority than what was granted to me by your trust and your friendship (and this collection, if it is to be “authoritative,” will not be, whether you like it or not, of my doing). But perhaps it would be better to end at this point all involvement and to erase any trace or mention that might betray the part, modest as it was, that I had in preparing this collection, so as to leave you able to henceforth make use of it without restraint. In any case, I was paid, and beyond, for my trouble, by the friendship that you had lavished on us for several years, and also by everything that I owe to an attentive, but of course unfaithful, reading (Nietzsche said: to understand is to equal) of your paintings, and of your writings.

I await your instructions.

Annette asks me to send warm regards to you and Lili. I send mine as well.

Yours,

<Hubert Damisch>

26. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Vence, 17 January 1967

My dear Damisch,

Before leaving Paris in December, I had reviewed two first batches of proofs that Mme Duconget had handed to me and now I have just resent her two other and final batches that I corrected in Vence—one containing all your “Notes.” I felt rather moved by the care that you gave to it all and the very adroit solutions that you have brought to a thousand minute problems. And I was constantly reminded, upon attentively rereading these thousand pages, of the considerable work they cost you, as well as of the warm attention that presided over them.⁸⁰

I do not think anything should be changed with regard to your preface, even though it seems to me to be—but I am perhaps wrong—somewhat disparate. It must be kept as is. Things that are done must not be revised after the fact; nothing must be altered or erased after the fact. So, if you share my opinion, we will keep it, we will not change anything to anything.

Besides, do we ever really erase anything? We believe we are erasing; everything is indelible.

Sometimes you can become very prickly; but I can too, of course, more than anyone, I do know it.

Warm regards from Lili and I to you and Annette,

<Jean Dubuffet>

80. Damisch’s copious notes include, in addition to information, extended excerpts from Dubuffet’s correspondence and previous versions and fragments of published and unpublished texts. The correspondence is indexed at the end of the second volume. Damisch would adopt this principle when he published the two subsequent volumes in 1995.

27. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet

31 January 1967

Dear Jean Dubuffet,

You call me and you call yourself prickly. But no matter how hard one tries to be bristly, to have all thorns out (a matter, of course, of defending oneself, of letting no one irritate the other thorn, the one that's turned inward), there's always still a sensitive point, a chink in the armor. Your letter, at once generous and (I will dare say) friendly, made me feel it. It is true that nothing is erased, that everything is indelible. You are man to say so and to want it, you, the champion of forgetting. What also divided us is being involved, each in our own field and at our own level, in concurrent enterprises (I mean that they concur to the same goal, but by different, if not opposite, paths): do you not think the attack can be led from several points at the same time? And if the relationships between he who paints and he who writes are always polemical (especially when there is one who writes, as you do, and one who is interested, as I am, in a certain kind of painting), do you not think that such a polemic, which is indispensable to keeping the "point" sharp and which is not without its purges, trials, condemnations, etc., would gain from not being brought to a personal level? In this regard, your assaults against philosophy are among the most invigorating.

Because you pretend to still want this preface, in fact made to leave you "puzzled," I will allow myself to add a few lines in which the reader will be advised about the point of dispute and also of the different viewpoints that make the painter prefer "refutation" there where the philosopher sees "contradiction," which is not, I am aware, without reason or consequence. But once again you remain the master of the book, as you will be of the additions I will need to make in the notes in order to account for a few observations that I've kept in mind as well as the inclusion of new texts in the body of the volume.

Why not say it: I am happy for the proof of loyalty you have given me, happy to again be associated with this endeavor; as I was to hear from you, some days ago now, and to receive good news about Lili. Still, the sensitive point I was talking about.

Very faithfully yours,
<Hubert Damisch>

28. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Vence, 3 February [19]67

My dear Damisch,

I do not find it necessary to fiddle with this preface again after the fact, I'm for keeping it without changing anything; and "contradiction" and "refutation" are words to which one can endlessly lend all kinds of nuances or angles; it seems to me rather futile to debate it, and it is not subtleties of this kind that the reader expects from our book or from its introduction. One could have any word mean anything one wants. In any case I cannot subscribe to such a simplistic summation

that would liken the creation of art to a “contradiction” (or “refutation”); that would mean giving many mechanisms entering into the creation of art equal or more weight as a spirit of “contradiction.”

Note that “contradiction” involves introducing new views, with regard to which the position is to adhere and not to contradict; some things are contested, others are affirmed; it simply remains that these are not the same. He who contradicts is in fact in the end he who contradicts these new propositions.

Yours very sincerely,
<Jean Dubuffet>

29. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Paris, 27 February 1968

My dear Damisch,

It's really kind of the magazine *Tel Quel* to provide excerpts from our book.⁸¹ It was, I see, a good idea to give them a copy. It should however be pointed out to them that my activity as a wine merchant has ended, if the aim is precision. But is precision the aim? Perhaps not, since only a fragment of this letter, without its context, is conveyed. But still, it's kind.

If precision is the aim, and consequently for well-sourced information, I want to, as an ex-wine merchant, point out to the magazine *Tel Quel* that the cliché according to which there are no opinions but those that favor personal interest, personal profit, is a bit simplistic. One could find wine merchants whose opinions are not necessarily oriented towards the greatest profit in the wine business. It is a mistake to believe that people—except of course for the powers that be at *Tel Quel*—have their personal benefit as the goal to pursue above all others. There are wine merchants whose thinking functions without consideration for their personal benefit. In this guild, there are even people—despite the amazement that such an anomaly might cause for the editors of the magazine *Tel Quel*—who are inclined to prefer opinions that go *counter* to their personal benefit. So many strange and unexpected facts in the world! Fortunately we have publications enamored with information, like the magazine *Tel Quel*, which strive to discover and point out these strange facts.

Yours.⁸²

81. Dubuffet refers here to “L’engagement de Jean Dubuffet peintre et négociant en vins,” *Tel Quel* 32 (Winter 1967), p. 94. The article, with no author named, consists of an excerpt from *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, citing a few lines from a letter written by Dubuffet in which he declines a request for a signature calling for the end of war in Vietnam (letter to Mrs. Margaret Gardiner, November 8, 1965, in *PES*, vol. 2, pp. 394–95). It is an anecdotal letter, which, isolated from the context of the book, seems to ridicule the artist. Following its publication, Damisch wrote to the editors of *Tel Quel* “to disassociate myself from them” (Damisch, conversation with Sophie Berrebi, January 15, 2014). Damisch, who was friendly with Sollers, published three articles in *Tel Quel* in the years preceding this incident: “La danse de Thésée” (no. 26, 1966), “L’écriture sans mesures” (no. 28, 1967), and “Robinson” (no. 31, 1967).

82. The letter is left unsigned.

30. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Paris, 9 August 68

My dear Damisch,

I've dawdled for I don't know how long before writing you. It's that my construction sites and assembly lines for sculptures and sculpture-paintings and painting-architectures are becoming more and more like factories, leaving me with no leisure time.⁸³

Your *little article*, as you say pleasantly, is entirely very excellent and I congratulate you.⁸⁴ Of course I agree to provide the reproductions to accompany them, four in total, you say, or more if necessary, as you deem proper. But L'Art Brut is closed for the time being. Mme. Geneviève Bert will return on August 20; and Slavko Kopac on September 1.

In the glue, you are a bit, you say; we are all a bit in the glue; that's the human condition. Every effort must be made to become unstuck. I hope you are making progress with the thesis. It would be good if you were able to free yourself of this thesis, it would be at least one thing done, and you would surely then feel much lighter.

I have not yet left Paris, continuing day in and day out to run the little factory mentioned above. Undoubtedly I will go to Touquet for a while between August 20 and September 20, at least sporadically.

Yours truly,
Jean Dubuffet

31. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch

Paris, 30 January [19]69

My dear Damisch,

A quick hello so that silence doesn't become too dense, a little postcard to break density and condensation. Remember that *andouillette* at Charpentiers, it was good.⁸⁵ The Morris-Cooper now has 6,000 kilometers on it, that's quite little. I use it—almost every day—to go to the studio on rue Labrouste, but it's not that far away.⁸⁶ My back hurts, I'm rather bothered to have my back hurt so.

Yours,
J.D.

83. During this period, Dubuffet was making models, sculpted in Styrofoam and cast in epoxy resin, for monumental projects and testing their enlargement. During the summer of 1968, he produced in particular the models for *Jardin d'email* and *Jardin d'hiver*.

84. Hubert Damisch, "Note sur l'Art Brut," in *Encyclopédia universalis*, vol. 2 (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis, 1968), pp. 508–09; reprinted in Damisch, *Ruptures/Cultures*, pp. 50–53.

85. Aux Charpentiers is a restaurant on rue de Mabillon where Damisch is a frequent patron.

86. Regarding this studio, which he rented between 1968 and 1972, Dubuffet specified in 1984: "at the end of an *impasse* off rue Labrouste. . . . This is where, starting in 1968, I executed my painted sculptures" (Jean Dubuffet, *Biographie au pas de course* [Paris: Gallimard, 2001], p. 96).

32. *Handwritten postcard from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Vence, 30 June [19]72

I found no other cloud but this one, which is not very metaphysical.⁸⁷ We are in Vence for three days to officially sign for the sale of *Le Vortex*⁸⁸ and to quickly box up the few odds and ends that remain. I received and read the prestigious treatise on clouds, so masterfully impressive and authoritative.⁸⁹ I thank you for sending it. Yours

Jean Dubuffet

33. *Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 15 January 1974

My dear Damisch,

By chance I learned of the existence of the encyclopedia *Universalia* [*sic*] and its article on me, which was published in November 1969 and written by you. I did not know of it, or else I had forgotten.⁹⁰ I find this article to be very masterfully turned; I very much admire the vision and understanding of my work it implies, and their very striking placement in context. So I congratulate you on this absolutely remarkable article, and I thank you for it.

I am working diligently at all times and without respite, in perpetual haste to finish my works in progress and to be able to undertake others that are waiting for their turn.⁹¹ As for the rest, I carry out this routine secluded; Lili, more and more of a homebody, also pulls me into seclusion. Age certainly has something to do with it as well.

Circumstances are such that I have come to meet a few American architects, with some of whom I've become friendly: Bunshaft,⁹² I. M. Pei,⁹³ Hartman,⁹⁴ Abramovitch [*sic*],⁹⁵ and others.

87. The postcard represents a child's painting, and was printed by the Éditions de L'École Moderne–Techniques Freinet.

88. *Le Vortex* is a house Dubuffet had built in Vence in 1959.

89. Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du nuage: Pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

90. In addition to the entry on Jean Dubuffet, Damisch also published in 1970 entries on "Art Brut," "Giotto," "Historicism," "Informel," "Modèle," and "Sociologie de l'Art" in the *Encyclopédia universalis*.

91. Dubuffet had recently completed the preliminary studies for *Le roman burlesque*, a mural of cutout figures for the headquarters of Renault. On January 11, he began working on a second model of *Site scripturaire*, a monumental work for the Defense neighborhood, to the east of Paris, and in early March, he began working on another monumental project, *Salon d'été*. Neither project was realized.

92. Gordon Bunshaft (1909–1990), an architect with the firm SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill), collected Dubuffet's work and designed the Chase Manhattan Bank on Wall Street, for which Dubuffet created the large-scale sculpture *Groupe de quatre arbres* in 1972.

93. The meeting with the architect I. M. Pei (1917–) in 1970 resulted in the project *Welcome Parade*, a group of sculptures as part of *L'Hourloupe*, conceived in 1974 by Dubuffet for the entrance of the east wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, designed by Pei. The project would not be realized, but in 2008 the sculptures were produced.

94. Craig W. Hartman, an architect with SOM.

95. Max Abramovitz (1908–2004), architect with the New York firm Harrison & Abramovitz.

Dubuffet. *Monsieur Macadam*. 1945.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

horizon of a culture that it takes as its main target, and signaling both the closure and the repressive character, if not the police-like nature, of that culture), that it is surprising to note or to remind ourselves that this painter only began to paint after the age of forty, and after having made several failed attempts at it.

I became interested in their architecture and even took little trips to study it, notably to Chicago a year ago.⁹⁶ And so I thought of you.⁹⁷ I must say that I do not feel I am fully in agreement with these forms of architecture.

Now I am involved with the Banque Lambert, in front of which there is the possibility of my making a monument.⁹⁸ You spoke about this edifice some time ago.

Yours,
Jean Dubuffet

34. Hubert Damisch: *DUBUFFET (Jean) (1969)*⁹⁹

Jean Dubuffet's production is now so plentiful, it occupies such a significant position in our cultural horizon (aiming, however, as it does, at the

96. During his trip to Chicago between October 27 and 30, 1972, Dubuffet took an architectural tour of the city.

97. Damisch began regularly publishing essays on architecture starting in 1957: "Walter Gropius et le Bauhaus" (*L'Année Sociologique*, 1956–1957); "Introduction," in *L'architecture raisonnée de Viollet-le-Duc* (Paris: Hermann, 1964); and "Architecture et industrie: Jean Prouvé ou le parti du détail," *Critique* 311 (April 1973), pp. 348–62.

98. The headquarters of the Lambert bank in Brussels was built by Gordon Bunshaft. Several projects were developed for a monumental piece for outside the building. The final proposal, entitled "Tour Dentellière," fifteen meters in height, was canceled in 1976.

99. "Dubuffet (Jean)," in *Encyclopédia universalis*, vol. 5, pp. 828–30.

A Labor of “Deconstruction”

Born in Le Havre in 1901, Dubuffet began to study painting in 1916. He was soon to be equally attracted to literature, to the study of languages (ancient and modern), to music, etc. But it was not until 1942, and the bleak days of the Occupation, that Dubuffet was to choose to devote himself definitively to an activity that he had early on turned away from in order to try his hand at other business. In fact, this waiting, this delay, this difficulty in finding what he calls the *Starting* were all there at the base of this undertaking that has, since then, not ceased to prosper. Dubuffet’s aims and ambitions have spread out progressively, following the rhythm of a constantly renewed production, organizing itself according to a certain number of cycles, each one a response to a systematic concern.

Jean Dubuffet’s avowed aversion to chapel art, to aristocratic art, if not to speak of any class art, brought up as its counterpart the idea, basic to the *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre* (1946), of painting just as anyone might paint, and for all comers. Such a program was, however, far from obvious and far from the ordinary. Dubuffet soon discovered that he could interest only a small circle (those first to appreciate and interpret his paintings: Jean Paulhan, Georges Limbour, Francis Ponge . . .) and that, instead of entailing a certain facility and laxity in terms of theory, it called for an intense labor of “deconstruction” on the part of the painter. This was a deconstruction of ideas, but also of habits and practices. The first illustration of this can be seen in the *Marionnettes de la ville et de la campagne* (1943–1944) and in *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie* (1945–1946), where the great multicolored theater of the capital city alternates with the barren landscape of fields and walls. Here is a prefiguration of the oscillation that was to be the wellspring of the painter’s activity. From his correspondence we learn that Dubuffet’s disposition constantly swung between the desire for an excessive and outrageous manifestation of psychic and manual mechanisms and the desire for a total absence of intervention. (“Perhaps, if one were to get as close as possible to what motivates me, one would have to see the simultaneous and permanent calling of these two orders, and of the effect that arises from their superposition, which is to underline the arbitrary and deceptive nature of the way in which we see things. . . . But this is not all there is to it: in addition to this disturbing effect of negation, there is, at the same time, that of bringing to light the intimate belonging of the human being to this world that seems full of mysterious virtues.”)

Lumpen Art and Philosophy

“Art must be born from the material . . . , it must be nourished by instinctive tracings and inscriptions. Painting is not staining. . . . The fundamental gesture of the painter is coating. . . . All that is needed is mud, just monochrome mud, if one wants to just paint.” Taken from the “Notes pour les fins-lettrés” (1946), these pre-

cepts explain a good part of Dubuffet's production up to the turning represented by *L'Hourloupe* (1963): from the portraits (*Plus beaux qu'ils croient*, 1947) to the *Corps de dames* (1950–1951), from the *Sols et terrains* (1952) to the *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* (1957–1958), including *Pâtes battues* (1953), the *Assemblages* (1953–1956), and other *Lieux cursifs* (1957), and the great lithographical suite of the *Phénomènes* (from 1958 on). So many series with evocative titles and from which a single project can be seen. This project aims to transform the viewer's gaze to one in which the viewer is called upon to play a part. ("The painting will not be viewed passively, taken in all at once by the viewer, but rather its process of creation will be relived, remade in thought, and, I dare say, re-acted.")

The recourse to practices (graffiti, incisions, scrapings and scratchings, finger marks) and to throwaway materials (sand, cement, ceruse, etc.) that were reputedly unworthy of art conferred on Dubuffet's work up to the *Hourloupe* series this savagely polemical quality that the American critic Clement Greenberg very accurately defined with the term *lumpen art*. It remains true, however, that after December 1950 (production date of the *Géologue*, a painting that was to take on an emblematic role in the work), Dubuffet's undertaking took a turn that was not so much social or political as it was philosophical or, as he liked to say, mental. *Paysages mentaux*, *Tables paysagées*, *Pierres philosophiques*, these are so many rigorously developed series where the ground (and what, after all, is a table if not a raised ground, a support offered to the work of writing and thought?) is progressively erected as a wall, "a wall of soil" set up vertically, a ground seen from above, the most stable background to any figure, to any figuration, or to any representation. Looking at *Texturologies*, these "sheets of wanderings" or of "serenity," as Dubuffet calls them, the eye effectively wanders, unable to recognize any center of interest or any sign of figurative organization. This series marks the culmination of Dubuffet's previous researches at the same time as it shows us the limit of his phenomenological project up to that point: the bracketing of the conscious gaze, the production (bringing to light) of what lies outside of our attention, but in which we are immersed from the beginning. Such a reduction only has meaning if, far from preparing for the return of the "subject" under a new guise, marked with the seal of idealism, it leads to the claim (a claim that is always to be taken up again and reiterated) that behind things there is nothing, *nothing other than the ground*. This is certainly a scandalous conclusion, especially when we see the painter working to upset and unseat the best-established underlying structures of perception (and, first of all, the idea that all perception is the perception of a figure or a ground). Dubuffet obstinately works against these structures; he undoes them; he takes them apart.

Dubuffet. *Le géologue*. 1950.
© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

L'Hourloupe

We see this project again, although under different modalities, in the *Matériologies* series, contemporary with *Texturologies*, and Dubuffet was soon to consider it as leading to an impasse (but surely this word might be applied to some of the most radical explorations in painting of our time?). After the short interlude of *Barbes*, the work suddenly changed direction. It seemed as if the painter were looking back to his first inspiration. The richly colored characters of the *Paris Circus* (1961–1962) were figures from the same theater as the puppets of his first works. It quickly became clear, however, that this was not just a regression, a return to origins, a persistent penchant for anecdote and for the picturesque. This was rather a variation, a recapitulation, a prelude to the great cycle of *L'Hourloupe* that was to be the painter's major focus from then on. This *Hourloupe* cycle sums up Dubuffet's entire undertaking, and it confers upon it its true dimension. But truth and the true have no easy place here where there are so many titles designed to disturb: *Algèbre des incertitudes*, *Foire aux équivalences*, *Versant de l'erreur*,

Administration des leurre, or *Donneur d'alarme* (1963), which took over from the *Géologue* and the *Sols et terrains* series. If in the word *Hourloupe* there is *loupe* (magnifying glass, i.e., a reference to optics), the word also recalls nonetheless through assonance *entourloupe* (a mean trick). In the land of *L'Hourloupe* it is the most arbitrarily graphical that is all-conquering, gradually filling the whole canvas. It forms a tight network, dividing the surface into a sequence of narrowly imbricated fragments. The blue and red striated pieces are part of an extraordinary and fantastic puzzle, more or less precisely fitted to the black background of the painting. These are labyrinths designed to disorient the eye, labyrinths such as appear already in *Texturologies*. This time, however, the gaze is not so much confronted with the background from which all figures emerge, it is rather that the figures come together and combine here to steal away the background; they substitute themselves for it; they appear as its lack, its absence. The difficulty that we find in trying to classify a work such as this, in situating it in the context of contemporary art and in assigning to it a place in history, echoes the long waiting period that Dubuffet underwent at the beginning. How is one to create a work, a work of art, at a time when these notions—the notion of work, the notion of art—have lost all sense of necessity apart from one that is utterly conventional, arbitrary, and born out of a type of collective illusion that is conferred upon them by the culture, by our culture? Dubuffet's originality, going against the grain of the Dadaist position, resides in his adamant refusal to accept the standards of culture. Far from giving in to the current idea that any object or piece of detritus can have its place in the museum once it has been signed with a name, Dubuffet refuses to be satisfied with the end forms of a millennial culture, and he turns always to contemplate the ground that they obscure. It is in this ground that are rooted those works designated by the term *art brut*, the works of individuals who are outside of the art world and who are in no way subject to its influence. Dubuffet has been collecting these works for almost twenty years, curious as he is to understand the unique impulse that they

Dubuffet. *Le donneur d'alarme*.
1963. © Fondation Dubuffet,
Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

uncover. This ground is savage, anonymous, aberrant: the very landscape of *L'Hourloupe*, and, beyond that, of Jean Dubuffet's entire production.

35. *Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 10 February [19]76

My dear Hubert Damisch,

I don't want to wait to finish the book to write you because I can clearly see (having skimmed through) that this is not a meal to finish hurriedly but rather a rich *confit*. The wraparound band is a great honor.¹⁰⁰ As is the dedication.¹⁰¹

You are, my dear Damisch, among those who have all my esteem and my affection. I understand you and I love you. I lament the fact that there have been clouds of ill humor in our relations, and I blame myself. My greatest desire is that their memory be entirely erased.

I will now sharpen all the blades of my intellect to approach this impressive corpus and be nourished by it.

Please say hello to your wife¹⁰² for me and send her my regards.

Warmly,

Jean Dubuffet

36. *Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 6 September 1976

My dear Damisch,

The occasion to meet you does not present itself often but I have it frequently in mind. I live in great seclusion, constantly occupied by the endless pursuit of my painting projects¹⁰³ and devoting all the little leisure time these leave me to Lili, who I fear will get bored. Hence, a certain habit I've acquired of doing everything else in thought only.¹⁰⁴

It seemed to me that during this vacation period (I also took time off in August, in thought), sending postcards from getaways to those near and dear goes without saying and so I send you one. I only fear that you will find its format a bit

100. *Ruptures/Cultures* was released in February 1976. The obi reads "*De Sade à Dubuffet*."

101. Damisch dedicated his book to Dubuffet in this way: "Pour Jean Dubuffet et puisqu'il est ici question de lui et d'une amitié bien plus ancienne et profonde que toute rupture. Son ami Hubert Damisch, Février '76" (For Jean Dubuffet and because this is about him and a friendship much older and deeper than any disagreement. His friend, Hubert Damisch, February '76).

102. Teri Wehn and Hubert Damisch met in the summer of 1968 through Geneviève and Gaëtan Picon and were married on June 3, 1969, in Paris.

103. Dubuffet was working on monumental paintings for the series *Théâtres de mémoire*.

104. Dubuffet's quip here is perhaps referring to the book *The Art of Memory* by Frances Yates (*L'art de la mémoire*, 1966, translated into French by Daniel Arasse, Paris, Gallimard, 1975), a source of inspiration for the series *Théâtres de mémoire*.

excessive for the dimensions of your keepsake box. As you were part of the first stages of *L'Hourloupe*, I would also like for you to be part of the series' end.¹⁰⁵

I have very fond memories of our recent little gathering (recent at least in my mind) and of your very kind wife whom I heartily enjoy.

Please send her my regards.

With affection,
Jean Dubuffet

37. *Handwritten letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet*

6 December [19]83

Bon pied, bel œil (but you write it better than I), it's a whole program and you uphold it joyously, like during the time of "Bonne Femme à Bébert"—I'm

105. Dubuffet gave Damisch a silkscreen print entitled *Site populeux*. Based on a drawing dating from 1973, at the beginning of the *Hourloupe* cycle, it had just been executed.

Dubuffet. Récapitule. 1978.

© Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

delighted.¹⁰⁶ As this sumptuous gift delights me (for someone who knows how to look at it), which comes unexpected and which arrived by mail, somewhat slow these days if I judge by the postmark date.

I have not forgotten you, my dear Jean, do not think that. *Bon pied, bel oeil*, and then what, for the heart? That you have not forgotten me either is what warms it, this heart, which must not be too chatty, nor too cold either. I will phone you then, in the first days of January, when I return from my island,¹⁰⁷ where I'm going to lock myself up for a few days. Do you know what for? To compile a few old texts and make my own little book. Among these, one that I hold particularly dear, and which was, long ago, it was yesterday, at the start of our friendship.¹⁰⁸ And what if this one remains *bon pied et bel oeil* too?

Hugs,

Hubert D.

38. *Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 11 December [19]83

Dear Hubert Damisch,

I am well aware that your heart is like a red-hot furnace and I think mine is as well. It overheats each time I open the two grandiose volumes of your compilations of my writings, and I do so often. Because I live in my own secluded nook (an invalid in seclusion), I have no news of you and I often wonder how life is going for you. But it isn't going really well for anyone I suppose. Secluded as I am, I have on this subject (nor on others) scarcely any certainty. I see few people, and I cannot get into their heads. But in yours I can feel my way a little. It seems to me that we could swap heads and I would not notice much of a difference.

It will be for me a great and real pleasure to speak with you when you return from your island and stop over on mine. Hugs from me too.

J.D.

39. *Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 14 August [19]84

Dear Damisch,

This letter comes (in a bottle) from your Robinson, still standing guard on his island, though it's sinking, his feet are now in the water, the sands are ever

106. Damisch is referring to two illustrated books using Dubuffet's language, *Labonfam abeber* (published by the artist, 1950) and *Bonpiet beau neuille* (Paris, Éditions Jeanne Bucher, 1983). "Bon pied bon oeil" (literally "good foot, good eye") is a French expression meaning "hale and hearty," for which Dubuffet has made up a phonetic equivalent. Damisch transforms it into "bon pied *bel oeil*" ("good foot, beautiful eye").

107. Belle-Île-en-Mer, where Damisch would go on a regular basis.

108. Damisch is referring to *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), a collection of writings on modern art. Using the title "Retour au texte," he included his first article on Dubuffet, "Dubuffet ou la lecture du monde."

quicker, thinning out. The stock of tobacco isn't yet exhausted but the lungs are, sucking both vital energy and deadly poison from it. Negativism acts the same way, both stimulating and toxic. Tobacco and negativism are equally perilous recourses. The best and worst of things. One is led to negate everything, to deny understanding any type of relevance, to discard every notion, starting with those of truth and knowledge (it is absurd to imagine that one being could know another), and finally to negate being. No island left at this point. Isle sunken. No more Robinson. Such is the morose message you'll find in the bottle. But I embrace you. [J.D.]

40. *Telegram from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

[date of telegram missing]

FROM FRIDAY TO ROBINSON. URGENT MUST SPEAK. PLEASE SEND YOUR TELEPHONE NO TO MY ISLAND. WITH GREAT FRIENDSHIP. DAMISCH LE SKEUL LOCMARIA 56360 LEPALAI

41. *Handwritten letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch*

Paris, 28 April [19]85

Dear Hubert Damisch,

I need to retrieve my manuscript *Bâtons rompus* that I sent you and of which there is no copy. I do not think you need it anymore now.¹⁰⁹

I tried to phone you but your number has changed.

In friendship,

J.D.

42. *Hubert Damisch, "Starting Ground" (1985)*¹¹⁰

I was about to finish this piece of writing when I heard that Jean Dubuffet had died. My first reaction was to smile, heartbroken, at the malicious trick he was playing on me; or, perhaps, it was rather an act of supreme discretion. I had been to see him, a few days beforehand, to bring him the manuscript of a loosely struc-

109. This manuscript originally included several interviews with Marcel Péju conducted in 1976 but not published. It was transcribed by Jacques Berne in 1980 and then reworked by Dubuffet into a form of fictional interviews along with a *train de rallonge* [extension train], to use the artist's expression, written in May 1983 and April 1984. This manuscript would be found on Dubuffet's desk at the time of his death, bearing the title *Bâtons rompus*. It was published in 1986 (Paris: Minuit and reprinted in *PES*, vol. 3). To speak *à bâtons rompus* means to be engaged in small talk.

110. "Entrée en matière," in *Jean Dubuffet* (Saint Paul: Maeght Foundation, 1985), pp. 13–35; reprinted in *Critique* 462, no. 41 (November 1985), pp. 1041–52. The exhibition *Jean Dubuffet. Retrospective* took place at the Maeght Foundation from July 6 to October 6, 1985.

tured questionnaire that he was hesitating about publishing¹¹¹ and to speak about the preface I was to write for it. I should add that I had only accepted the commission to do it out of a desire to give our renewed friendship a breath of air, a sense of a future, a reprieve. The summer before, I had received from him a short letter in the way of a message in a bottle (“This letter comes [in a bottle] from your Robinson, still standing guard on his island, though it’s sinking, his feet are now in the water, the sands are ever quicker, thinning out.”).¹¹² That Wednesday, he opened his door to me bent double, as he had been for a long time, and in a hurry to get back to his table and to sit down again, unable to alter his ninety-degree bent posture. (It was at this very table that death, for once dignified and respectful as it can be with artists, seemed to have made its coming felt.) He made no secret of the fact that he was not well, was breathing with difficulty, and he had not worked for several weeks. I spent two hours with him; these were happy hours even though we ourselves were far from happy. We agreed that I would bring him, in a week’s time, the text that I was writing for him.

I must emphasize: that I was writing *for him*. Because that was the part of the problem that I was trying at the time to make clear to him, and that his death now makes much harder and surely insoluble. If Dubuffet were to be the primary if not the sole intended recipient of this text, as he was for so many others, how am I now to get myself out of this spot that I had got myself into: falling for the illusion that I had more time left to solve, with his help, the question I was asking?

I had good reasons for wanting to see him. Almost twenty years ago, I spent several months gathering what was at the time the entirety of Dubuffet’s writings and of part of his correspondence. This was really his own project, begun from an idea suggested to him, I think, by Raymond Queneau.¹¹³ But it was my own idea to publish the *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants* in two volumes with a format identical to that of the *carnets* of Leonardo da Vinci,¹¹⁴ adding to it an extensive series of footnotes that allowed me to increase considerably the heft of the documentation and to give it fully the air of a critical and erudite publication. This idea, aiming in equal measure at honoring him and at provoking him, was not guaranteed to please Dubuffet, any more than was the needlessly convoluted and overly allegorical preface that I wrote on this occasion. In this preface, I compared him to a “new Robinson”¹¹⁵—no better figure than a man completely *set apart* and having to rely only on his own resources to survive seemed to me to be a closer fit as an illustration of Dubuffet’s aim to be, as he said, “anti-cultural.” All of this was too intellectual for Dubuffet’s taste, and it served as a pretext (but only as a pretext because the man, and the way in which he conceived of friendship, were otherwise com-

111. See document 41 in this issue.

112. See letter dated August 14, 1984 (no. 39 in this issue).

113. Raymond Queneau (1903–1976). Writer—and, like Dubuffet, a native of Le Havre—who carried out various duties at Gallimard. At the time of the projected publication of Dubuffet’s writings, he was in charge of *L’encyclopédie de la Pléiade*.

114. *Les carnets de Léonard de Vinci*, preface by Paul Valéry, ed. Edward McCurdy (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

115. Damisch, “Le véritable Robinson—Préface.”

plex) for a spat between us lasting ten years, interrupted only by very short and isolated moments when we could talk to each other. Ten years then, until, at his invitation, from 1982 on, I was able once again to make my way regularly to his studio on the rue de Vaugirard.

Early on, however, Dubuffet had let me know that, once he had got over his first bad reaction to the publication, he had listened to his friends (“[My heart] overheats each time I open the two grandiose volumes of your compilations of my writings, and I do so often”).¹¹⁶ As for the figure of Robinson, it reappeared with regularity in his letters, and he even went so far as to sign them “J.D. Robinson II” (“It will be for me a great and real pleasure to speak with you when you return from your island and stop over on mine”). Still, on a critical or theoretical level, I did not know what to think of such a change in his attitude (as far as the “heart” is concerned, that is something else, and, as I said, mine is broken). “I see few people, and I cannot get into their heads. But in yours I can feel my way a little. It seems to me that we could swap heads and I would not notice much of a difference.” I quote this letter he wrote to me in December 1983 not out of vanity or to flatter myself that I knew him better than others, but rather to give me cause for concern. This is because for me, the idea of a possible exchange of our heads brought up serious doubts at the same time, as I saw in it an invitation to think further, to not be satisfied with looking back on twenty or so years, to not act as if history or memory could take the place of thought.

This is the problem, therefore, that I articulated right at the start of the first version of this text, written as it was—I repeat—before I learned of his death: is it possible today (but this “today” will henceforth not have the same meaning, the same resonance, the same implications) to discuss Dubuffet’s work in a way that is not, or is no longer, only mimetic? Is it possible to speak of what was (and I can no longer add: and which remains) his artistic project, and to write about it, without still deferring to the rhetorical model of his own writings, a rhetorical model that could well be more a matter of tone or *accent* rather than something systematic? No one better than he, the artist himself, was able to comment on his work, to explain its developments, to define its goals, to articulate its objectives; and he was able to do this with such a constant felicity of expression, such a convincing eloquence, such authority, that great was the temptation to slip into this mold and slide onto the theatrical stage that he had made for his own use and purpose, running the risk of playing only a bit part and reducing oneself to the role of a borrower when fascination did not go so far as to entail echolalia. Most of those who have ventured to write about him have, in one way or another, fallen into this trap—and I do not excuse myself. Hence the idea that, for one such as myself who had let himself be fascinated, it might be possible to go back to the beginning, to

116. This and the following two quotations are from Damisch’s letter of December 11, 1983 (no. 38 in this issue).

take up things at their very outset, but without, for all that, being duped by such a fiction. In matters of art, the claimed-for critical distance is only a lure; so much is it true that aesthetic judgment, if it is to have any range and relevance, assumes an effect of attraction, when it does not proceed directly from attraction itself.

Looking back like this seemed to me to be particularly pressing and necessary because history appeared to be repeating itself (unless, as Dubuffet used to say, it is stuttering). I had remarked on this to him, and he agreed with me: many artists, young and not so young, are now touched by a tendency analogous to what was his own at the end of the '30s. The situation in which art finds itself today, the turn it has taken, getting itself lost in its own meanderings (explaining surely its current ups and downs), makes it difficult to find one's own place; it is a carnival where all the noise and confusion have lost all sense of the subversive, and many refuse to have anything to do with it. The very fact that the museum has managed to orchestrate the dispute of which it is itself the subject, that it has succeeded in staging it, only increases the confusion; and, quite naturally, the institution draws in its turn a surplus of authority from this to the extent that it functions now as a perfectly eclectic agency of legitimation, one that can go as far as dispensing derision.

Seen with a longer lens, there does appear to be a considerable difference between the art scene of today and that of the immediate postwar years. Europe, and France itself, now have museums that are sufficiently well stocked so that anyone can get a pretty much complete view of the development of twentieth-century art; whereas, at the time, artists could only see things spottily and partially, and by means of a few journals and specialized galleries. I am not convinced, for all that, that the basic problem has really changed. Dubuffet's example proves that a way can be open to an artist that is other than simply wanting to create *in the sequence*, in the direct line of a history whose supposed continuity would, it seems, adapt to and absorb all sorts of breaks and sidetrackings. The New York Museum of Modern Art is often cited as one of the reasons behind the birth of the great American painting of the '50s. In the galleries arranged there by Alfred Barr (and where Dubuffet was to figure early on and with prominence, which was not at all usual for an European artist), the painters of Pollock and de Kooning's generation supposedly became aware of the direction in which modern art was going, and it was there that they reconnected with the heritage of the European avant-garde in order to start anew. In 1947, the American critic Clement Greenberg felt that a comparison could be made between the art of Pollock and Dubuffet. Each of them, according to Greenberg, created painting in which the graphic, linear, black-and-white component was predominant.¹¹⁷ Well-founded or not, this connection was a consecration. Thus, right off the bat, Dubuffet, only just introduced into the United States, was given his place and was a point of reference in the history of modern art that was being written or that was—already—being rewritten. But this comparison only held in terms of form. From a historical perspective, whatever one might understand by "history,"

117. Clement Greenberg, *The Nation*, February 1, 1947; reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Arrogant Purpose: 1945–1949: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp. 122–25.—*Author*.

nothing could be further removed from the selective relationship that Pollock entertained with the art of Picasso and Miró than the reaction of generalized rejection that was Dubuffet's, and that Dubuffet would choose to maintain.

This having been said, there still arises the difficulty that I referred to at the beginning: is it possible to read Dubuffet's comments on his relations with the art world, and to put oneself freely in line with his thoughts, denouncing along with him the straitjacket that the institution puts us in, contenting oneself with reiterating a discourse that is perfectly self-sufficient and that has no need of trumpeters? We must surely believe the artist when he describes his state of mind at the beginning, a beginning that was particularly long and difficult since, as he said, it took him three attempts before, already past forty,¹¹⁸ he could find what he called the "starting." But what starting was this, and to what did it lead? That the works on view in museums had lost all interest for him is something that we can all acknowledge and understand. Art has its ups and downs, as do art lovers themselves, who are not always in tune with the times and quick to reset their watches each time the wind seems to turn. But for an artist, or for one who aspires to become one, it is a different matter. Some artists seem to be born at the right time, to take advantage of the current that carries them forward, careful to keep their heads above water in order to stay on the right course and to observe what is being played out around them; others do not have this opportunity (or supposed opportunity), and they find themselves floundering on the banks at a time of low water that offers no clear perspective. As for Dubuffet, I suggest that he was of a completely different mind about these things. I would say that his intention was to wait for the water's lowest ebb before introducing himself into a scene where—something he has since then constantly reiterated as if to better convince himself, and us with him—there was no place whatsoever for him.

It was not long before Dubuffet was seen contradicting himself. The occasions that he offers the reader for such an interpretation are too numerous and obvious for there not to be something suspect here that calls for closer inspection. Was it not the case that the painter was willing to have his works shown in the very same museums that he saw as the strongest bulwarks of the orthodoxy that he was struggling his utmost to fight? I was never really convinced by his defense: namely, that he was hoping against hope and reason that the publicity thus gained for his views would end up turning against the publicity machine itself. Yet I much prefer this admittedly provisional choice (as was Descartes's moral stance in his hour of methodical doubt) to the exhibitionism of those who create, within the very walls of the institution, installations and "performances" that they claim will show us how the museum functions, and that will, in this way, undermine it. All of these projects have meaning only in regard to the place where they are set up, and they borrow their meaning from that place. On the other hand, a Dubuffet painting, drawing, or sculpture is something that I can

118. "When you get down to it, I was totally alone, with no place to be, no direction to follow, no roots to tie me down, no connections, no part in anything . . . so, you can see very well how I was looking for the starting" (Jean Dubuffet, "Plus modeste," in *PES*, vol. 1, p. 90).

keep close to me, and I can even put it away and only look at it from time to time, as Le Corbusier wanted,¹¹⁹ like the lovers of Chinese or Japanese art, without its losing anything whatsoever, quite the contrary, of its power of virulence. These works then follow another trajectory than that of the museum, another trajectory even—it is time for us to realize this—than the polemical. Seen in the light of what was to become “theory,” they can be defined less by what they transform (with a reservation that I shall give in due course) or by what they stand against than as the products of a creative economy that aimed to be strictly self-generated and self-sustaining.

History is never more present, nor more active, than in those places where one makes a pretense of being unaware of it, or of removing oneself from it. But this pretense is not without some justification in a time when the very meaning of “history” is not so certain, when it is not the name of a nightmare from which many—with Joyce’s *Ulysses*—aspire to awaken. Dubuffet’s ambition—some will say his pretension, if not his illusion—which was to work in solitude, on the margins of the artistic community and deferring as little as possible to social demands and to the demands of cultural institutions (when he did enter the fray, he was quick to regret it, as we can see with the Renault affair),¹²⁰ did not imply that his work really had no relation to the context in which it occurred. Professional historians were not slow to insert him into a whole network of correspondences, influences, and filiations. Dubuffet himself, in saying that art had been pretty much constantly repetitive from its origins until the beginning of the twentieth century, agreed implicitly that his work was, to some extent, part of the well-known (or supposedly well-known) great upheaval. Dubuffet did not deny that the art of our century tore a hole in the too closely threaded fabric of history. What he deplored, however, was that the repetition compulsion returned so quickly and that, under increasingly academic forms, it was to defer once again to the very same conventional values

Dubuffet. Double autoportrait au chapeau melon. 1936. © Fondation Dubuffet, Paris/ARS, New York 2015.

119. Le Corbusier intended the Maison La Roche (1923–1925) to include a system of temporary arrangements of artworks, but the idea was rejected by its commissioner. See John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 55.

120. In March 1974, Dubuffet began working on the project of a monumental outdoor sculpture commissioned by Renault for its new headquarters in Boulogne-Billancourt, to be entitled *Jardin d'été*. The commission was eventually canceled by Renault, which resulted in a notable lawsuit.

from which modern art had thought to find its release. Today, we have to make an effort to take the measure, retrospectively, of how far Dubuffet's productions went in breaking—to the point of scandal—with those of the so-called School of Paris, since then completely forgotten. The “starting ground” that he had found was thus, no doubt, no more than a point of departure. I can think of no better tribute to confer on him, today, than to reject the notion of a point of arrival, and to see in his undertaking, in his work as a whole, a perpetual departure, an immense “starting ground” that will always be for us—as is abundantly already clear—increasingly necessary.

I am giving here a meaning to the word “departure” that is at once that of a start, a beginning, a selection, and a parting. One can, of course, try to reconnect the threads that Dubuffet thought he was out to break apart. From the very point of view of an art criticism, or even an art history, that takes upon itself to fully measure its subject (i.e., art), it seems to me to be more interesting and instructive to look for other ways to understand the impulse and the decision that was to lead this artist to remove himself, at least symbolically, from the scene in which he was forced, however, to function, as if he were only able to show himself through a voluntary isolation, a radical distancing, and through the refusal of all participation with those from whom he meant to stand apart. As if the distinction that he was so concerned to make between the trade or the profession of the artist and a creative activity that could not be reduced to a response to a commission and that could obey no other motives, imperatives, or laws, obeying a necessity that was other than strictly subjective, as if this effectively radical *departure* was for him the condition, the indispensable precondition, to the practice of art as he understood it. The starting ground assumes, in the first place, that the subject of the work be introduced. In the literary field, it happens often that this subject is identical with the author. (Montaigne: “I depict myself.”) I know of hardly any Dubuffet self-portraits outside of the double self-portrait of 1936 that was not included in the complete-works catalogue,¹²¹ and a series of marker drawings that were all done the same week at the end of 1966.¹²² And yet Dubuffet's work does present, nonetheless, a strongly subjective component or, as I said of his writings, accent. This is because for him there was no other “starting” possible than by putting himself into play, by showing himself precisely as a *subject*, at the departure of an undertaking that had nothing about it that was autobiographical, and that was characterized at the same time, and in no way paradoxically, by a great concern for objectivity. The starting ground is first of all a starting of the subject, but of a subject who runs the greatest risk of self-loss, or at least of loss of self-recognition.

The solipsism that Dubuffet went in for was not, in truth, so much philosophical as it was aesthetic. Even if he were sometimes to entertain the fantasy, he was in reality far from claiming that there was no reality outside of his own thoughts and perceptions. He was much more concerned to shift the way in which we perceive what

121. The reference is to *Double autoportrait au chapeau melon* (1936), which was included in the second edition of the *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, vol. 1 (Paris: Minuit, 1993), no. 99, p. 35.

122. *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, vol. 22 (Paris: Weber, 1972): *Cartes et ustensiles*, nos. 204–209. —Author.

we call “reality,” to upset the optics, or at least the focus. As far as art was concerned, it was a different matter. Doubtless there is no artist worthy of the name who does not dream of producing a work capable of making all other works useless or superfluous. The difference between Dubuffet and his fellow artists was that he made no secret of it, and that this urge, which remained unformulated in others, assumed with him the figure of an explicit precondition: his art took him over to such an extent that it excluded, once again, any thought of parceling out. For whoever might be interested in the meaning that we might appropriately give to the word “history” when speaking of art, there is no doubt more to be learned from the way in which an artist concocts for his own use a personal art history, which is in some way private and necessarily partial and one-sided, than there is from all of the heavy tomes that claim to reconstruct an objective panorama. But what can we say of an artist who seems to function only by first creating a void around himself, and then shoring himself up so much in his own work that he knows no other reality than the one that allows him in (bringing us back to the solipsist fantasy that I mentioned before)? Were the idea not totally foreign to Dubuffet, we might be tempted to liken this “starting ground” to a religious-conversion ground—but this would have to be a perfectly intolerant and exclusive religion. Furthermore, this religion could not be satisfied with making a void *around* itself: the presupposition of the void being its *internal* condition, and the entire work of the painter having meaning only in how it measures up against that void.

We should be careful, however, to see this correctly: if Dubuffet claimed to absent himself from the art scene, and to stand outside of history, it was in order to better make that scene his own and to interiorize it, in the way that the first living organisms in the sea are understood to have ended up enclosing within their own bodies the liquid environment that their cells needed to survive. I pointed out a long time ago that the *question of the work* was always at work within Dubuffet, and that he wished to be the guardian of that question at a time that lent itself poorly or scarcely at all to it. It looks very much, in fact, as if, far from sticking to one party or to one particular position, as one is supposed to do, Dubuffet had on the contrary wanted to introduce contradiction right into the very heart of his work, in order to have it function systematically. Dubuffet himself brought up many times the back-and-forth alternation in his work of two opposed attitudes or aspects: one of these would bring him to emphasize, as far as the most outrageous caricature, the figures of his own theater, i.e., the characters and objects; the other bringing him to deny them all individuality, all identity, in order to absorb character and object into a background from which they could no longer be distinguished. We can see that this contradiction might have been in part dialectical in nature since it gave its meaning and historical dimension to his work. We should not, however, be in too much of a hurry to believe that this contradiction could have been overcome, still less overstepped, except in a completely provisional way; and we should

not see this history as moving in only one direction. What strikes me above all in Dubuffet's trajectory is the way he had of seeing his own productions as so many propositions that were, in some fashion, foreign to him. It was up to him, therefore, to go back to them in order to develop them further, to transform them, and to tirelessly pick up the threads that he had let go in the precipitation of action. Art's functioning, and what alone enables us to give meaning to the notion of a "history" of art, is written here within the limits of a singular oeuvre, and yet one that aspired to nothing less than occupying the entire horizon. "Starting ground" means choosing to stay within that ground, and to stay long enough to discover the necessary plurality of that ground, its infinite functioning.

This is no doubt true, in one way or another, of any even slightly creative artist of consequence: the works already made serve eventually as points of departure for other creations, and as matter for thought. Dubuffet went so far as to make a system of this, to the extent that for him the working followed a distinctive rhythm. At first, he worked as quickly as possible, in an almost automatic way, trying to short-circuit all calculation and deliberation; then he would go back, as I said, to the products of this first rather frenetic activity—either to use them, through cutout, sampling, transfer, etc. in other creations that took on a more elaborated and thought-out appearance (as in the numerous assemblages that he did, from the *Empreintes* of 1953 to the *Théâtres de mémoire* of 1979,¹²³ corresponding to so many levels in his work) or to force himself to translate by conscious effort what was the effect of chance or, at the very least, of objective processes that were, in principle, outside of all premeditation and all control. The 1952 series *Terres radieuses*—which counts for me as one of the most extreme advances in his work—in which he tried to reproduce by strictly graphic means the emergence of *Sols et terrains* [1950–1952], derived from this desire that regularly came over him to follow the ways of the material, and to reflect upon the most random products of his own activity in the hope of being thus led to make discoveries or inventions going completely beyond his previous ideas, and that he could not have imagined otherwise.

Here again, what might appear to be a contradiction or a paradox was, in truth, a methodical move. Far from being the signs of a greater freedom, Dubuffet's automatism, the rapidity of his execution, the absence of control, represented so many constraints that had meaning only when put in parallel with the work that they made possible; a work that itself obeyed strictly inverse constraints, but that answered also to a similar concern for objectivity. The painter's work thus meets that of writing (or should we say: the work of writing meets the work of painting?) in that the painter, like the writer, can in no case be unaware of the solicitations, the suggestions, that are born from the very exercise of his art, the power of invention within it, its instructional value, and that he cannot claim to use it as a simple instrument, as if the idea preexisted its expression or—to use Cézanne's term—its *realization*. The starting ground, for a painter as for a writer, comes down to aligning oneself so well with

123. Dubuffet worked on the series *Théâtres de mémoire* from October 1975 to 1979.

painting or writing that it seems as if the entire substance of the world and of thought were concentrated there, in the colors and the letters, the material and the words, on the canvas or on the blank page.

The best illustration of Dubuffet's way of working, and of the mixture of the arbitrary and the necessary, of subjectivism and objectivism, that was its wellspring, can be seen in the process that, from *Terres radieuses* and passing through, among others, *Texturologies* and *Matériologies*—further examples of the work's border regions—was to end up with the long drift of *L'Hourloupe*. But the word “mixture” fails to capture the incessant play of the inversion of signs at which this painter had become a master. Because the instructions that he took from his repeated incursions into the reputedly objective field of phenomena¹²⁴ could appear perfectly arbitrary, while his most delirious ramblings, his most “subjective” phantasmagoria, offered up the inverse image of an unparalleled necessity. The reason for this is surely that Dubuffet was to penetrate so far into what made up the substance of his art that the signs reversed themselves, once again incessantly, from matter to form and from form to matter. It has not been sufficiently emphasized how the notion of the *informel* was unacceptable to a culture that has not ceased, since Aristotle, to associate the idea of art with the passage from matter to form.¹²⁵ There is no doubt that the painter of *Sols et terrains* and *Matériologies* paid tribute to the formless. But these exercises had, to the eyes of the Western tradition, a singularly *regressive* reach and range that brought about this paradox of a return, of a going back, a “starting back” of form into the matter that, logically speaking, preceded it.

We must look here at the functions assigned to drawing in *Terres radieuses* and in the works that derive from the same reflexive vein. The subversion of line as contour is taken to its limit, and it goes so far as to the point of conversion, the stroke of the line having no longer the function of defining the figures, of blocking out the background, but rather—by a movement that is the exact equivalent, in the plastic order, to the one by which Dubuffet removed himself from the art scene so as to, as we have said, interiorize it—to make the background accede to the status of figure while the figures, in the traditional sense of the term, appear as simple accidents of reading in the continuity of a text that obeys another, more delicate, subtle, and shifting cutting-out than the one given us by the grid of language. The graphic redoubling of the textures of matter that are the most constant fabric of reality was to lead inevitably—and, I would insist, by means of multiple crossings and sidetrackings—to the *Hourloupe* cycle, which was to play systematically on the ambiguities between plenitude and emptiness, being and nonbeing, figure and ground, that are underwritten by painting's matter. But this matter is one that, it happens, has lost all thickness of substance and emerges itself from a network of traces that no longer can be assigned the value of contours or textures, and from which color itself is not disassociated, constrained as it is moreover by a

124. An allusion to the lithographic series *Phénomènes* (1958).

125. See Hubert Damisch, “L’informel,” in *Encyclopedia universalis*, vol. 8 (Paris: *Encyclopedia universalis*, 1970); reprinted in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 131–41.

minimal chromatic range exclusively dominated by unshared blue and red that confers upon it a perfectly arbitrary technical connotation.

With *L'Hourloupe*, and more so with the series *Mires*, presented at the Venice Biennial in 1984, and the eventual sequel of the *Non-lieux*,¹²⁶ Dubuffet seemed to have chosen not to betray the commonplace that the oldest artists might gain an unparalleled and, so to speak, timeless freedom. The fact that Dubuffet never deferred to received conventions or established rules is not enough, however, to ensure that his entire work might not be written into the register of the Imaginary Museum in which Titian would meet up with Goya, or Picasso might reconnect with Velázquez—about which the master of *L'Hourloupe* cared not a whit. But we could justifiably expect from him yet another turn that might retrospectively confer on his undertaking an unequaled range and agility. Through the framing out of which they emerge, the works that make up *Mires* are organized once again around the idea of a *site*. However, as for the point at which they are aiming, the “I” that is the subject cannot localize or locate it. I have to admit, nevertheless, considering the *punctum* in them that points at me (but that also, as Barthes would say, punctures me), that, as it is with a geographical map, these images must correspond, in at least one point, to the territory that they checker. One point at least, but this point can be found everywhere and nowhere, just as it must be, according to Walter Benjamin, for *translation*; for translation can only touch the original text in a fugitive and instantaneous fashion, and in an infinitely small point of meaning, just like it is with a tangent that only touches the circle at one point: “. . . with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity.”¹²⁷ All notion of anchorage disappeared with the *Non-lieux*, and thus all possibility of *translation*. Dubuffet, who, throughout his whole life, was to give, for the satisfaction of a few philosophers, the greatest attention to the notion of *site*, under its most diverse forms, going from the *Table, compagne assidue* to *Sols et terrains* to *Routes et chaussées* to *Lieux momentanés, cursifs, or abrégés*, but always erected in vertical fashion, as so many surfaces for inscription, sites of writing and painting in the strict sense of these terms, this same artist will have ended up casting into doubt what, in his painting, was the most constant theme, the seat as well as the subject, at the same time allowing to no one other than himself, as we could have foreseen, the right to decide upon the ground of the process. *Non-lieu*: painting pleads not guilty here, having yet lost what it is that the crowds who press to see Impressionist exhibitions take for its eminently reassuring *raison d'être*. Against all hope, against all reason, against all expectation, painting reaches a point where it has so well triumphed over “reality” that it is responsible only for itself and supports itself solely by its own structural framework. This is not nothing, doubtless. “No island left at this point. Isle sunken. No more Robinson.”¹²⁸ What remains is the work, and for us to find its starting ground.

126. Dubuffet labored at this last series of works during 1984 until he decided to stop painting. He was to produce only a few drawings after this date.

127. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 80.

128. Letter from Dubuffet to Damisch dated August 14, 1984, no. 39 in this issue.