Jean Dubuffet
The would-be barbarian

PEPE KARMEL

In the 1950s and 60s, Jean Dubuffet was widely praised as the most important French painter of his era. With the passage of time, however, the need for historical simplification has tended — especially in the United States — to flatten the history of those decades into a textbook sequence of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism, followed by the grab-bag of Post-Modernism. This sequence leaves little room for Dubuffet.

Recently, French critics and curators have reacted against the American downgrading of Dubuffet. Their new, European perspective on post-war art tends, ironically, to underestimate the extent of Dubuffet’s influence in the United States. His American link was forged, not only by frequent exhibitions in New York but also by a protracted visit to the United States, extending from fall 1951 through spring 1952. Midway through this visit, in December 1951, he traveled to Chicago, where the Art Institute had organized an exhibition of his work. Dubuffet gave a lecture, ‘Anticultural Positions’, that, as Richard Feigen later wrote, ‘made more of an impact in one hour on the hard core that pushed through the snow that Thursday morning than he had in five months on all the New York artists.’ The ‘hard core’, in this case, consisted of pioneering art collectors such as Maurice Culpberg and struggling young artists such as Claes Oldenburg.

Dubuffet seemed, in this lecture, to point the way toward a new art acknowledging the brutal realities of a world in moral and physical ruin. As he said in ‘Anticultural Positions’:

I have the impression that a complete liquidation of all the ways of thinking, whose sum constituted what has been called humanism, and which has been fundamental for our culture since the Renaissance, is now taking place… I think the increasing knowledge of the thinking of so-called primitive peoples, during the past fifty years, has contributed a good deal to this change… It may be that refinement, celebration, depth of mind are on their side, and not on ours.

Personally, I believe very much in values of savagery: I mean: instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness… For myself, I aim for an art which would be in immediate connection with daily life, an art which would start from this daily life and which would be a very direct and very sincere expression of our real life and our real moods.

Neither Classicism nor Cubism had could respond adequately to the horrors of the war years; perhaps it was time for an art that accepted violence and madness as inescapable elements of the human condition, an art that would abandon the ivory tower in favour of real life.

In the short run, it was the embrace of everyday existence that proved the most influential aspect of Dubuffet’s art and thought, pushing artists such as Olden...
burg, Jim Dine, Allan Kaprow, and Edward Kienholz toward an exploration of the quotidian reality of American life. Dubuffet's *Bodies of women*, shown as a group at Pierre Matisse's New York gallery in January 1961, were especially influential. Henry McBride, the dean of the New York avant-garde, commented that Dubuffet's 'nudes appear to have been flattened out by a steamroller and allowed to dry in the sun for quite some time.' Contrasting these new canvases, such as *Tree of fluids* (Fig. 1), with Dubuffet's earlier, more 'gay' and 'carefree' pictures, McBride imagined Dubuffet telling his viewers: 'So...you insist upon moaning amid the ashes of a dead Europe. Very well, then, I'll moan with you.' Visually, Dubuffet 'proceeds not only to flatten his Parisiennes like pancakes but to mummify them with Egyptian burnt sienna.'

This look - of something smeared, decrepit, and vaguely extraneous - had a considerable vogue in American art of the 1950s and early 1960s. Claes Oldenburg's *Mamkin torso* of 1960 (Fig. 2), for instance, seems almost like a three-dimensional version of Dubuffet's *Tree of fluids*. Dubuffet created the rugose surface of *Tree of fluids* by kneading oil paint into ridges and depressions. Oldenburg abandoned traditional materials altogether, shaping the *Mamkin torso* by stretching cloth soaked in plaster over a wire frame, allowing the cloth to sag and bunch. Although Oldenburg's figure is less radically distorted than Dubuffet's, the bumps and hollows of his surface create a disturbing image of the body as a kind of billowing sack. Pink and white paint has been smeared unevenly over the surface of *Mamkin torso*, though the purity of the colours lends the figure a certain delicacy.

After 1960, Oldenburg and the other artists engaged with what became known as Pop Art abandoned this kind of funky paint handling. The 'classic' Pop of the mid-1960s adopted instead a clean, mechanical look closer to that of nascent Minimalism. It is this, in part, that accounts for the later American sense of Dubuffet as an old-fashioned painter, committed to an image that is visibly handmade. However, this reaction is anachronistic. What struck artists and critics at the time was the randomness and impersonality of Dubuffet's surfaces, qualities especially pronounced in his *Texturologies* of the late 1950s (Fig. 3).

In his book *Loss of the Self in Modern...* it from proving influential. In their statements of 1962-67, Minimalists such as Robert Morris and Donald Judd seemed to echo Dubuffet's call for a rejection of humanist art and philosophy. Judd argued that 'compositional effects' tended to carry with them 'all the structures, values, feelings' of the European tradition. 'It suits me fine if that's all down the drain', Judd proclaimed.5

In a 1964 essay Dubuffet had remarked that: 'Art must be born from the material and from the tool, and must preserve the trace of the tool or the tool's battle with the material.' This insistence on the expressive values of materials and tools filtered into the culture of the American art world via Francophile critics such as Sypher. By 1967, Morris and other artists began to adopt the idea that art should be an objective exploration of the formal properties of materials. Responding to the MOMA Jackson Pollock retrospective of 1967, Morris praised Pollock, not for his personal vision, but for 'his recovery process and holding onto it as part of the end form of the work. Pollock's recovery of process involved a profound rethink of the role of both material and tools in making. The stick that drips paint is a tool that acknowledges the fluidity of paint.'

From this point of view, Morris' untitled 'scatter' piece of 1966 (Fig. 4) might be regarded as a three-dimensional equivalent to one of Dubuffet's *Texturologies* of 1957 (Fig. 3), with Dubuffet's specks of black, white, grey and brown paint translated into a random arrangement of multi-coloured threadwaste and other materials. Dubuffet's insistence on the value of raw materials - and formlessness (l'informer) in general - was to have a long afterlife in the work of Post-Minimal artists such as Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, and Alan Saret, as well as Morris, and in the writings of critics such as Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois.

It should be noted, however, that the Post-Minimal tradition expanded on the formal qualities of Dubuffet's work at the expense of its emotive content. It remained for the artists of the 1980s and 1990s to recapture Dubuffet's sense of aggressive deceptiveness, his dual assault on the canvas and the human figure. Julian Schnabel transformed the idea of 'scatter' art in his plate paintings of 1978-80, where fragments of recognisable figuration seem to float upwards through a maelstrom of broken crockery (Fig. 5). Other artists of the 1980s delved even

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2. *Mamkin torso*: two-piece bathing suit by Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929), 1960. Cloth soaked in plaster over wire frame and painted. 82.6 x 37.5 x 11.5 cm. Private collection.

3. Literature and Art. Published in 1962, the cultural historian Wylie Sypher cast Dubuffet as a prophet of impersonal art. Sypher pointed out that contemporary writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute no longer aimed to create the illusion of coherent fictional characters. The individual 'self', in their writings, dissolved into seemingly arbitrary statements and descriptions. Similarly, Sypher argued:

What painters like Dubuffet and Fautrier have particularly refused is the nineteenth-century 'touch', the signature of the individual temperament. In fact Dubuffet has called his most-discussed works 'Assemblages', for they are passages 'cut out' and thrown together into a 'texturography' that seems to erase entirely the personality of the painter. He likes to think of his paintings as a stretching of pigment featureless as a gravel walk.30

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4. It might be argued that Sypher offers a tendentious interpretation of Dubuffet's work, strongly influenced by the writings of Henri Focillon and George Kubler, both of whom set out to describe the abstract 'life of forms in art' - a history of art without any artists. However, the fact that Sypher's reading of Dubuffet may have been tendentious did not stop...
more deeply into the sense of disgust with the human condition – and the body in particular – that ran like a subterranean current through Dubuffet's œuvre.\(^2\)

The pictorial expression of this emotion did not, of course, begin with Dubuffet. It was evident in the German Expressionists and their successors, and there were American equivalents in the work of Paul Cadmus and Ivan Albright. (Dubuffet made a special point of seeking out Albright during his visit to Chicago in 1951).\(^2\) However, these artists began with a quasi-academic image of the human figure, making it disgusting by distorting it or by emphasising aspects of the body (wrinkles, pores, sagging skin) that academic painters tended to suppress. Dubuffet’s innovation was to demonstrate that a sense of disgust could be generated within a completely non-academic – or even abstract – approach to composition.

In the 1980s, works like Mike Kelley’s More love hours than can ever be repaid (Fig. 6) offered a blasphemous parody of Abstract Expressionism, reinventing the ‘allover’ field as a motley assemblage of dirty bedclothes and discarded rag-dolls. The immediate point of reference was Jackson Pollock, but the sense of ‘objectness’ derived from Dubuffet and his American followers.

As these examples suggest, it is possible to see Dubuffet as the antecedent for – and source of – much of the vital and challenging art of the last fifty years. In this sense, he is a more important artist than even his European admirers acknowledge. On the other hand, his reputation in the 1950s and 60s depended in large part on his public rejection of previous art. This rejection cannot be taken at face value.

Dubuffet’s bold endorsements of savagery and madness recycle Surrealist clichés.\(^2\) Formally, his work remains dependent on the late Cubism of Picasso, and on the work of Braque, Miró, and Klee. In ‘Anti-Cultural Positions,’ he says that:

Occidental culture is very fond of analysis, and I have no taste for analysis, and no confidence in it. One thinks everything can be known by way of dismantling it or dissecting it into all its parts, and studying separately each of these parts... My own feeling is quite different. I am more disposed, on the contrary, to always recompose things... My inclination leads me, when I want to see something really well, to regard it with its surroundings, whole. If I want to know this pencil on the table, I don’t look straight at the pencil. I look at the middle of the room, trying to include in my glance as many objects as possible.\(^2\)

This interest in seeing the visual field as a whole is a legacy from Impressionism and Cubism. It has nothing to do with non-occidental art or with the art of ‘primitive’ cultures. (As Leo Steinberg remarked in another context, ‘God help the hunter whose focus spans the whole visual field while taking aim.’)\(^3\)

Dubuffet’s comments about figuration, technique, and composition are equally indebted to Picasso and Braque.\(^2\) The job of painting is to ornament surfaces. Therefore it should only consider two dimensions, excluding all depth, he declared. ‘Let us find signs allowing us to flatten out objects on the surface of the picture... letting the surface speak its own language and not a false language of three dimensions... instead of using mechanical perspective, we should super-
impose objects, or juxtapose them. This idea of preserving the picture plane by flattening all visible surfaces, and by substituting superimposition for perspectival recession, had been a dogma of advanced art since 1908.

In practice, Dubuffet tended to avoid Cubist superimposition, presenting his motifs as frontal images arranged on a flat surface. In one of his early masterpieces, *Childbirth* (Fig. 7), the delivery table with the nude mother and her newborn child has been tilted forward so that they lie flat in the picture plane, facing the viewer, parallel with the clothed standing figures at left and right. It might be argued that Dubuffet's innovation, here, lies in the discovery that the crude imagery of children's drawings and graffiti could be conscripted to play the same role, spatially, as the linear divisions of geometric abstraction. But this was not exactly Dubuffet's discovery. As Clement Greenberg noted in 1947, Paul Klee had already adopted the linear schematisations of children's drawings. Indeed, Dubuffet's treatment of the arms as long flat strips, bending at right angles, directly recalls Klee's 1923 drawing of a Singer of comic opera (Fig. 8).

Both Klee and Dubuffet belong to a long modernist tradition of interest in 'non-art' images such as children's drawings, graffiti, and prehistoric cave painting. Scholarly interest in these subjects went back to the 1880s, and provided an important intermediary between the avant-garde and its sources. Just as Dubuffet and the Surrealists discovered the art of the insane in the pages of Hans Prinzhorn's *Art of the Mentally Ill*, so too they seem to have studied the illustrations (Fig. 9) in Georges Luquet's 1927 treatise *Children's Drawings* rather than looking at actual children's drawings. It seems likely that Dubuffet's awareness of graffiti was mediated both by the illustrations in Luquet and by the photographs of Parisian graffiti that Brassai, an intimate of Picasso and the Surrealists, began making in the early 1930s.

The paradoxical reality is that the cruder Dubuffet's figuration becomes, the more directly he seems in touch with the depths of the human psyche, the more likely it is that his imagery derives from some scholarly or artistic source. In his magnificent 1949 canvas, *The man with a rose* (one of the pictures acquired by the great Chicago collector Maurice Cugelberg), the man's head floats upward like a giant balloon, its profile reduced to a bold squiggle (Fig. 10). Surely, one thinks, nothing could be simpler or more spontaneous than this undulating line whose curves alternately signify brow, nose, upper lip, lower lip and chin. Nonetheless, it has a clear modernist lineage, descending from the profiles in Picasso's work of the late 1920s and early 1930s (Fig. 11).

Even if its figuration is borrowed, the human face occupies a more important place in Dubuffet's work than it does on the whole, in Picasso's. The ambivalence
in its depiction - simultaneously expressive and impassive - looks back, once again, to Surrealism.

In 1935, some years before the beginning of his mature career, Dubuffet executed a series of painted papier-mâché masks depicting his circle of friends (Fig. 12). Such masks were an essential element in the carnival celebrations that played an important role in Catholic popular culture from the middle ages until the early twentieth century. Like the Roman sartorialia from which they descended, carnivals staged a reversal of the usual social structure: representatives of the working class were crowned as king and queen of the carnival, while the rich and powerful were subjected to the taunts of the crowd. Masks allowed participants to assume new social roles, and to evade the reprimands of authority.65

Suppressed during World War I, the carnival tradition survived in the 1930s in a few provincial towns in Germany and Switzerland (and, more famously, in Brazil). The Surrealists viewed these remnants as precious historical relics, popular rituals achieving the Surrealist goals of liberation and transformation of the self. In 1930, Dubuffet's friend George Limbour published an article on carnival masks in the Surrealist journal Documents, linking them to the masks worn by the actors in ancient Greek tragedy and the masks made by South Sea islanders. It was illustrated with photographs by Jacques-André Boiffard (Fig. 13).66 Not surprisingly, when Limbour recalled a visit to Dubuffet's mask-making workshop in 1935, he described it as 'a theater, a sort of morgue...an exuberant carnival!'67

Dubuffet's masks were first cast from the faces of their subjects, and then paint-
seems to have begun with painted contours corresponding to a ‘death’s head’ graffito, with a large rounded cranium perched above the crude box of the jaw. In similar graffito photographed by Brassai, the eyes, nose, and mouth are usually indicated by simple gouges. Dubuffet preserves the schematic geography of these heads (with the eyes, for instance, set unrealistically high in the oval of the cranium), but individualises their facial features by drawing and scratching contours and furrows corresponding to the actual physiognomy of his subjects. The long lines descending from nose to jaw, in the painting, correspond exactly to the deeply creased face visible in a photograph of Dhôtel. Like carnival masks, Dubuffet’s portraits shun naturalistic resemblance in order to become larger-than-life expressions of identity. They demonstrate the continued viability of a genre that might have seemed exhausted in the post-war era, with its refusal of the humanist belief in the value of individual identity. Their influence remains visible in the hip-hop portraits of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Joe Zucker, and also, surprisingly, in a late self-portrait by Picasso (Fig. 15), where the ninety-year-old artist grafts his characteristic mirada fuerte (powerful gaze) onto the skull shape that Dubuffet had extracted from Parisian graffiti.

The power of Dubuffet’s simplified imagery is most apparent, however, in his own work of the 1960s. In 1962-63, Dubuffet transformed his style, abandoning the pasty surfaces and muddy colours that had characterised his work since the mid-1940s. In their place, he adopted a new vocabulary of heavy lines enclosing areas of red, white, and blue – either solid or traversed by rows of parallel hatch marks (Fig. 16). This new, cloisonné style may have been Dubuffet’s response to the clean lines and bright colours of American Pop Art. Sometimes the lines and colours formed a self-contained shape, silhouetted against a black or white field; sometimes they expanded to fill the entire canvas. Apart from the black or white borders, the new style eliminated empty space. The interlocking elements formed a continuous field of
colours and lines, suppressing any distinction between figure and ground. The viewer had to struggle to distinguish the figures and objects still present within Dubuffet's compositions.

The simplicity of Dubuffet's way of drawing, honed over the preceding twenty years, made it possible to reconcile figuration with apparent abstraction. However, this simplicity also injected a new ambiguity into his figuration. The flattened forms of his Gas-stove (Fig. 16) could equally well be read as a face, with twin burners for eyes, dials for nostrils, an oven door for chin, and a horizontal bar for mouth. Having stretched the limits of high modernism to include savage or childish imagery that might previously have seemed unworthy of notice, Dubuffet now rejoined its formalist mainstream.

Ironically, he rejoined this tradition just as it seemed to expire. Contemporary artists such as Mike Kelley or Raymond Pettibon, who work in the spirit of Dubuffet's pictures of the 1940s and 50s, no longer bother to prove their modernist credentials. Pettibon's casual sketch of a schizophrenic janitor (Fig. 17), pushed over the edge by accidental exposure to LSD, answers Dubuffet's call, in 'Anticultural Positions', for an art of instinct, mood, and madness, an art in touch with daily life, an art that liquidates the humanist tradition. However, unlike Dubuffet, Pettibon is no longer looking over his shoulder, checking that an Arminian's threat still leads back from his work to Picasso's.

What has changed, as well, is the definition of the Other. The barbarian that Dubuffet hoped to emulate was a child, a madman, or a tribesman from some 'primitive' culture. In contrast, the models for Pettibon's drawings come from the horror comics of the 1950s. Dubuffet and the Surrealists could still dream that Western society would be transfigured by the encounter with an alien consciousness—and that their art would be the agent of that transformation. This utopia has now been foreclosed. For the artists of Pettibon's generation, the barbarian at the gates is the mass culture with which they grew up. They know that there is no deep spiritual transformation to be expected from Mad magazine—or from LSD—because they have already tried them. What remains is the ritual of liberation, a rebellion without a cause, with Dubuffet as its patron saint.


2 From a French perspective, the American downgrading of Dubuffet had a clear polemical purpose. Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Chicago and London, 1983, argues that the triumph of Abstract Expressionism was a matter of political exigency, not aesthetic superiority. American critics and curators assembled a school of new American painters to adorn the new American imperialism. As French critics have shaken off their inferiority complex, so too French curators have revised their installations; the most recent installation of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, in the Centre Pompidou, gives pride of place to Dubuffet and his peers, with Abstract Expressionism treated as merely an American equivalent to art informel. Art Brut, situation, Cobra, and other European movements. The process of reversal revisionism was recently crowned by a full-scale Dubuffet retrospective in Paris by Daniel Adhel (ed.), exh. cat., Dubuffet: Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2001-2002.

3 The importance of Dubuffet's physical presence in the United States is stressed by D'Amour, op. cit., pp. 61-62. A more comprehensive narrative of Dubuffet's visit, stressing his desire to transfer his collection of art brut from France to the United States (where it could be housed in Alfonso Ossorio's mansion in East Hampton), appears in Anna Hiddleston and Marie-Claire Llorens, 'Biographical' in Abadie, op. cit., pp. 346 and 372-75.

4 Richard L. Feigen, Dubuffet and the Abstraction, exh. cat., New York, 1949, pp. 6-7. On pp. 30-11 of the same catalogue, the artist Georges Colin states that he, Leon Golub, and Cosimo Campiti were in the audience. D'Amour, op. cit., p. 69, adds that Oldenburg was as well. All of these artists were members of the Chicago avant-garde group habitation Momentum, opposed to what Colin called the "sentiments of French formalism". This catalogue contains a facsimile reproduction of Dubuffet's handwritten text for 'Anticultural Positions', which allows us to infer the visual sources on the female body evident in William de Keerling's Winters of 1950-52.


The first section of Dubuffet, op. cit. in n. 16 above (1972), p. 23, is entitled "Partant de l'informe" or "Formlessness as a Point of Departure.

Robert Morris, "Araki Fujii: Artforum, vol. vi, no. 8 (April 1969), pp. 83-85; reprinted in idem, Continual Project: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., The Writing of Robert Morris, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1985, pp. 43. The resemblance between Morris's interpretation of Pollock and Szyfer's interpretation of Dubuffet is probably not coincidental, as Morris recalls that he was aware of Dubuffet's work (personal conversation of 1 August 2002); however, it was Kuhler's Shape of Time that provided the explicit model for Morris's MFA thesis, Form-Classes in the Work of Concrete Structures, New York, 1966, a key text for both Minimalism and Post-Minimalism. To grasp the full import of Morris's remarks about Pollock, it is necessary to recall that, from the 1940s through the mid-1960s, Pollock's work had been understood primarily as an expression of his transcendent personality on this topic, see Leo Steinberg, "Month in Review: Fifteen Years of Jackson Pollock," Art in America, vol. xiv, no. 7 (November 1955), pp. 43-44. 46 reprinted in Karmel, op. cit., pp. 51-53.


Benedikt Ricard's career-making review, "Ricard's Hans Hansen at Mary Boone," Art in America, vol. lv, no. 7 (November 1979), p. 125, brilliantly captured the emotional resonance of Schnabel's work. "There comes a point in a painter's life when civilization abandons him; he looks at his brushes like a gorilla looking at a fork and knife, digs in with his hands, smashes the plate, and makes a big mess. There is a distant echo here, of Dubuffet's 1946 statement that "The essential gesture of painting is not to spread colored fluids around with... a little bunch of hairs, but to plunge your hands in buckets or bowls and to use your fingers and palms to cover the wall with dirt and paste... Inched it body to body, to leave the traces of the thoughts and rhythms and impulses that run through your nerves and veins." (Dubuffet, op. cit. in n. 16 above [1972], p. 43). Peter Szyfer, Dubuffet saw this engagement with material not as an impersonal process but as a means of self-expression, writing that "every trace of the hand (written, drawn, painted) is an imprint — the gesture speaks as clearly as the inferences of the voice." (ibid., p. 39) And that even chance accidents make the observer feel the presence of the man (ibid., p. 25).


On Dubuffet's visit to Altoona, see Feldman, op. cit., pp. 6-7. Intentionally disgusting depictions of the human body were seen "a common feature of American [Korff] comics in the 1960s" (for which, see, n. 45 below), which seem to have derived their visual style in part from German Expressionism.

16 Cézanne’s painting of a vase in still life is one of the most influential in art history. Cézanne’s style is characterized by a focus on the relationship between objects and space, with an emphasis on form and color. The use of color and light is particularly notable, with Cézanne’s paintings often appearing more three-dimensional than two-dimensional. The still life is a common subject in Cézanne’s works, and it is often used to explore the relationship between objects and space. The painting of a vase in still life is a good example of this, with Cézanne’s use of color and light creating a sense of depth and volume in the work.