

# Painting in Danger: Jean Dubuffet's *Hautes Pâtes*\*

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## **Abstract**

Jean Dubuffet made his dramatic breakthrough into the art world in the spring of 1946 with what would become his signature innovation, the *hautes pâtes* (thick or high pastes). Experimenting with unorthodox materials and techniques, he loaded his canvases with materials so heavy and unstable that even before their public debut in the exhibition *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, his unwieldy pastes began cracking, crumbling, and melting off the canvas and onto the floor. According to Dubuffet's apologists, he welcomed these 'modifications', delighting in mutable, mutant materials that succumbed to the forces of gravity and entropy. Revisiting the story of Dubuffet's meltdowns, this article highlights the uneasy double bind Dubuffet found himself in at the beginning of his career, as his theoretical interest in ephemerality gave way to his clients' and dealers' well-founded practical concerns over the longevity and material durability of his work.

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*It's when things are put at risk [en extrême péril] that they start to sing. Personally, I like to put the things I love into extreme danger.--Jean Dubuffet<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Causette", in: Id., *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, ed. Hubert Damisch, Paris 1967 (hereafter *PES*), vol. 2, 68. This text was originally published in the catalogue to an exhibition at the Galerie René Drouin in October 1947 titled *Portraits à ressemblance*

## Introduction

[1] In the spring of 1946, Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) burst onto the Parisian art scene with what would become his first and perhaps best-known innovation, the *hautes pâtes* (thick or high pastes). Experimenting with unorthodox materials and untried techniques, he loaded his canvases with materials so unwieldy and unstable that even before their public debut in the exhibition *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie., Hautes Pâtes* strange things began happening. A wandering eye, a missing tooth: Dubuffet's too-heavy pastes were cracking, crumbling, and, in some cases, melting off the canvas and onto the floor. According to Dubuffet's apologists, he welcomed these modifications, delighting in mutable materials that succumbed to the forces of gravity and entropy. Declaring himself an "actualist",<sup>2</sup> and a "presentist and ephemeralist",<sup>3</sup> he made works that were not only hard to hang (as they were so impractically heavy) but also difficult to preserve (being so precariously unstable).

[2] It began with the gift of a painting by the artist to his new friend, the writer Jean Paulhan. Eager to impress, Dubuffet had hand delivered it to Paulhan's apartment. He followed up with a letter, laced with anxious apprehension: "I brought the painting [one of his early *Views of Paris*] over this morning and placed it on top of the radiator in your foyer, does it please you?"<sup>4</sup> There is no record of Paulhan's response (because Dubuffet destroyed all of his letters when they had a falling out years later), but it certainly was not what Dubuffet was expecting, as his next letter makes clear. He had been fishing for compliments, not criticism, and Paulhan's message caught him completely off guard: the painting, which had been imprudently placed above a heated radiator, had melted off the canvas.<sup>5</sup> The incident might have passed under the radar had Dubuffet's close friend, critic Michel Tapié, not publicized it in *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.: Hautes Pâtes de J. Dubuffet*, the book he published in conjunction with the exhibition which was sold in extradite, à ressemblance cuite et confite dans la mémoire, à ressemblance éclatée dans la mémoire de M. Jean Dubuffet, peintre, exh. cat., Paris 1947: "C'est quand on met les choses en extrême péril que leur bonté se met à chanter. Moi j'aime mettre les choses que j'aime en extrême péril."

<sup>2</sup> Jean Dubuffet to Jean Paulhan, [31 October 1944], in: *Dubuffet - Paulhan Correspondance, 1944-1968*, eds. Julien Dieudonné and Marianne Jakobi, Paris 2003 (hereafter *DP*), 139. The brackets are used by Jakobi and Dieudonné to indicate their dating.

<sup>3</sup> Dubuffet, "Mise en garde de l'auteur", in: *PES*, vol. 1, 25: "Je suis présentiste, éphémériste."

<sup>4</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, 30 March [1944], in: *DP*, 64: "J'ai porté ce matin le tableau sur le radiateur de votre antichambre, comment vous plaira-t-il?"

<sup>5</sup> Dubuffet wrote, "Aie! La rue. Je me disais le reste a bien passé la rue passera bien [...]. Et pas de remède! [...] L'avant train déjà dégluti, et la queue de la bête qui ne veut pas pénétrer, déplorable position! Nous essaierons d'un peu de vernis que j'irai mettre: peut-être que, les embus rafraichis, ça ira mieux?" Dubuffet to Paulhan, [2 April 1944], in: *DP*, 66.

the gallery to promote it. Thanks to Tapié, by the time the *hautes pâtes* were publicly unveiled at the opening, all of the critics had been apprised. In small, strategically placed parentheses set off at the foot of the page, Tapié relayed two different anecdotes:

*The game of destruction becomes total, once time intervenes and the destructive spirit [...] in a game that can go all the way to "frenetic restlessness". (Note: Sometimes it's also the material that gets overexcited. One painting, over the course of an entire night, spit all over the harmonium, to the great fury of Lili [Dubuffet's wife, Emilie Carlu]. Another allowed itself a similar unseemliness all over Jean Paulhan's mantelpiece. Mr. Macadam [a reference to the exhibition's titular painting, Dubuffet's eponymous Monsieur Macadam] becomes terribly soft when it's too hot. Jean Dubuffet enjoys these adventures enormously, calling them "hippopotamus sudations").<sup>6</sup>*

Dubuffet's "destructive spirit" entailed more than a grandstanding attack on easel painting and the conventions of *belle peinture*, Tapié argued; it extended to his embrace of the actual physical deterioration of the work of art over time. The "hippopotamus sudations" were only literalizing the artist's "game of destruction".

[3] Dubuffet regularly described his materials as living, breathing things, made of vital, vibrant matter. Keenly attuned to the physical and affective properties of materials, he wrote of their animacy and agency: "I don't see a great difference (metaphysically speaking) between the paste I spread out and, for example, a cat, a trout, or a bull. My paste is a being as much as they."<sup>7</sup> Restless, agitated and spitting, he viewed his paintings as oversized, overweight animals, heaving and languishing in the heat, exuding beads of perspiration and sticky streams of steamy sweat. The sudorific metaphors capture the paintings' heat-induced liquefaction into a disquietingly viscous material.

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Tapié, *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie., Hautes pâtes de J. Dubuffet*, Paris 1946, reprinted in: *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, ed. Max Loreau, fasc. 2: *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, Paris 1966, 119. "Le jeu destructeur devient total, laisse intervenir le temps et l'esprit destructeur ... ce sont les remaniements empiriques d'œuvres déjà achevées, séchées, des destructions partielles, des arrachements qui sont aussitôt enrobés de nouveau, dans un jeu qui peut aller jusqu'à L'ÉNERVEMENT FRÉNÉTIQUE. (Note: Quelquefois c'est aussi le matériau qui s'énerve. Tel tableau, toute une nuit, a craché sur l'harmonium, à la grande fureur de Lili [Dubuffet's wife]. Un autre s'est permis pareille incongruité sur la cheminée de Jean Paulhan. M. Macadam devient terriblement tendre s'il fait trop chaud. Jean Dubuffet s'amuse énormément de ces aventures qu'il qualifie de sudations d'hippopotames."

<sup>7</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Tables paysagées, paysages du mental, pierres philosophiques", in: *PES*, vol. 2, 76-77. "Vibrant matter" is in the title of Jane Bennett's book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Chicago 2010.

[4] Not only zoomorphic, Dubuffet's works were also anthropomorphic. Playing on the sexual connotations of the word *hot*, the critics compared the paintings to shameless, lewd tramps, at once promiscuous and uninhibited, improper and unpredictable. "These 'hautes pâtes' are behaving in a very loose manner", critic Justin Saget wrote.<sup>8</sup> Surely Dubuffet's titles pushed the critics toward such readings: *Scorieuse* is both made of slag and depicts a slag (a promiscuous woman or, colloquially, a slut) and *Venus of the Sidewalk* [du trottoir] is made of asphalt but is also a streetwalker. The other term Dubuffet used to describe these meltdowns, in his correspondence with Paulhan, was a "phenomenon of hematidrosis".<sup>9</sup> A medical term for sweating blood, hematidrosis is a condition precipitated by heat in which the body's vital fluids hemorrhage and blood is secreted with sweat. Analogizing his canvases to invalids afflicted with an unsightly medical condition, Dubuffet noted their "flows that stain everything placed under the painting in the dirtiest way".<sup>10</sup> In fact, the first title Dubuffet had proposed for the series likewise conceives of the paintings as the unexpected consequences of a physical ailment or malady. In place of the moniker "hautes pâtes" that Dubuffet settled on a month before the exhibition, the discarded title described the paintings as "séquelles": *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie., Séquelles*.<sup>11</sup> From the Latin *sequi*, to follow, the term *séquelles* means aftereffects or consequences. *Squeleae* refers to a serious illness or contagion resulting from a disease or injury. Dubuffet's original title suggests that he viewed the paintings in much the same way: as the unintended, uncontrollable consequences of a physical accident or infection.

[5] This article revisits Dubuffet's initial foray into matter painting in 1945–46, a period of incredible technical and material experimentation that coincided, significantly, with his full-fledged entry into the gallery system. Although he had already mounted two exhibitions, at René Drouin in 1944 and at the smaller Galerie André, on the Left Bank of Paris, in 1945, the opening of *Mirobolus, Macadam et*

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<sup>8</sup> Justin Saget, "Du beau, du bon, Dubuffet", in: *Combat*, 8 November 1946: "Ces 'hautes pâtes' se comportent de façon fort dévergondée." See: Archives Fondation Dubuffet, Paris, Jean Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946. Beginning in 1944, Dubuffet subscribed to a service offered by L'Argus de la Presse and began receiving regular press clippings that he collated into notebooks titled "Coupures de presse". Archived in the Fondation Dubuffet, they constitute an invaluable resource for scholars researching his reception.

<sup>9</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, 15 [January 1946], in: *DP*, 274.

<sup>10</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, 15 [January 1946], in: *DP*, 274: "Je suis très alarmé par ce phénomène d'hématidrose intéressant *L'Homme des Murailles* [...]. Rien n'est plus redoutable que ces écoulements, qui maculent de la façon la plus sale les objets se trouvant sous le tableau."

<sup>11</sup> Preliminary, hand-drawn mock-up of the exhibition catalogue, in: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Archives Michel Tapié.

*Cie., Hautes Pâtes* in the spring of 1946 marks the moment when his works, made of "very vulgar substances with no value" became subjected to intense commercial attention and speculation.<sup>12</sup> The story of Dubuffet's meltdowns offers us a window into these early years of his burgeoning career as he began to enter the spaces of art, balancing his already hard-set, anti-establishment stance (what Tapié called his "game of destruction") with the demands of the market. Relying on a range of primary sources, including press reviews, published writings, and the artist's correspondence with his dealers and closest supporters, this article examines the uneasy double bind Dubuffet found himself in at the beginning of his career, as his interest in ephemerality ran up against his clients' and dealers' well-founded practical concerns over the longevity and material durability of his work.

### Curious Laboratory

[6] The elaboration of the *hautes pâtes* was a lengthy process of trial and error, false starts, and missteps. Dubuffet experimented with a cocktail of, in his words, "unusual materials and techniques"<sup>13</sup> that lacked any fine-art connotations, any suggestion of refinement, expertise, aesthetic decorativeness, or permanence (Fig. 1). Committed to the principle that "All of the usual tools of painting—canvases, easels, brushes, paint tubes—bring about a paralyzing effect on whoever uses them",<sup>14</sup> he embarked into uncharted territory, and, as he broke away from materials and methods tried and true, the technical problems he faced were considerable: "I am working on my paintings; I am making an incredible mess, smearings; I try greasy putties, mixes of varnish and plaster, of ceruse and plaster, etc., and then it doesn't dry, or else it fails in one way or another; I have a lot of problems."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dubuffet, "L'auteur répond à quelques questions", in: *PES*, vol. 2, 65: "des substances très vulgaires et sans prix aucun". On Dubuffet's new affiliations to the art market and his nascent public, see Rachel E. Perry, "Making Painting Matter: Jean Dubuffet, Jean Fautrier, and French Art in the 1940s", in: *Center 37. National Gallery of Art. Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Record of Activities and Research Reports June 2016–May 2017*, Washington 2017, 165-167. <https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/research/CASVA/pdfs/center-37.pdf> (accessed 4 August 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Dubuffet, "L'auteur répond à quelques questions", in: *PES*, vol. 2, 66: "des matières insolites avec des techniques insolites".

<sup>14</sup> Dubuffet to Gaston Chaissac, 24 June [1947], in: *PES*, vol. 1, 465-466.

<sup>15</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [15 November 1945], in: *DP*, 256: "Je travaille à mes peintures, je fais un gâchis incroyable, des barbouillages, j'essaie du mastic gras, des mélanges de vernis et de plâtre, de céruse et de plâtre, etc. et en suite ça ne sèche pas, ou bien ça rate d'une façon ou d'une autre, j'ai bien du tracas." The series was created between May 1945 and



1 Jean Dubuffet in his studio, rue de Rennes, 1951 (photograph © Robert Doisneau / Gamma-Rapho; © VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

[7] These "messes" and "problems" varied from inconsequential glitches to serious casualties, and the pages of Dubuffet's correspondence detail these incidents with alarm and amusement. In one notable instance, a portrait by Dubuffet that Paulhan had mounted over his mantel became welded to the wall due to the heat of the fireplace, with the cement and tar in the painting adhering inextricably to the wall. Paulhan was supposedly proud of this "peinture attachante", using a word that means both "attached to" (by an adhesive) and "endearing, engaging and charming".<sup>16</sup>

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July 1946. See the letter from Dubuffet to Pierre Matisse on 13 November 1952: "C'est seulement à partir d'avril 1945 et au cours des mois suivants que j'ai commencé mes expérimentations de peintures mettant en œuvre des matériaux grossiers de maçonnerie, sable et gravier, etc., que j'avais en vue depuis plus d'une année, et en vue desquelles j'avais principalement aménagés, un an plus tôt, mon local de la rue Vaugirard; auxquelles peintures j'ai donné plus tard le nom de 'Hautes Pâtes'." In: Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, New York, Archives Pierre Matisse (hereafter APM).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Guth, "Jean Paulhan", in: *Gazette des lettres*, 3 May 1947 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947): "Au mur le portrait de Paulhan par Dubuffet. En ciment, épais comme une plaque tournante [...]. Un morceau de goudron posé sur la cheminée [...]. Voyez-je ne peux pas le décoller. La première chaleur a scellé le mariage de l'œuvre et du support [...]. Jean Paulhan est fier de cette peinture attachante."

[8] With no guidebook or do-it-yourself manual to consult, Dubuffet tried to solicit advice from other artists, in particular Georges Braque and Jean Fautrier.<sup>17</sup> He wanted to know more about their "working methods", but didn't want to "bother" them or "appear nosy or intrusive", so he asked Paulhan to serve as an intermediary.<sup>18</sup>

*What you write me about Braque's working methods really interested me. If he would agree to speak with me for an hour to give me his advice on the use of [l]sorel or contreplaqué, and how to organize the layers of coats in order to achieve a quick drying of the color even when it is used in thick masses (like Fautrier achieves) and how to obtain a certain mat shine, etc., it would be infinitely valuable to me.*<sup>19</sup>

Following a visit by Fautrier to his studio, Dubuffet desperately wanted feedback: "I would be very interested if he [Fautrier] would relay his observations and advice."<sup>20</sup> Not daring "to contact him directly", he pressed Paulhan over and over again to "be good enough to intercede" on his behalf with Fautrier who was notoriously secretive with his working practices and materials.<sup>21</sup>

[9] When his fellow painters did not readily share all of their secret recipes and expertise, Dubuffet undertook what he called "technical studies", arranging for a

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<sup>17</sup> Recognizing a need in the market, Dubuffet would write just such a manual several years later. Entitled "Peinturez hardi!", it was planned to be featured as a column in his unrealized *Almanach de l'art brut* of 1948. See Rachel E. Perry, "'Paint Boldly!' Dubuffet's DIY Manual", in: *October* 154 (Fall 2015), 87-110.

<sup>18</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [3 October 1946], in: *DF*, 329-330: "Mais je ne voudrais pas l'importuner ni paraître indiscret."

<sup>19</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [3 October 1946], in: *DF*, 329-330: "Ce que tu m'écris des façons de travail de Braque m'a très vivement intéressé. S'il voulait bien accepter de parler une fois avec moi une heure pour me faire profiter de ses avis relativement à l'emploi de l'isorel ou du contreplaqué, et comment organiser les couches d'enduits de manière à obtenir un séchage rapide de la couleur même employée en masses épaisses (comme obtient Fautrier) et comment obtenir certain éclat mat etc. ça me serait infiniment précieux."

<sup>20</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [7 April 1944], in: *DP*, 72: "je serais très intéressé s'il voulait bien vous communiquer pour moi ses observations et conseils, plus explicitement formulés pour les lettres des boutiques".

<sup>21</sup> Wanting to know how Fautrier hung his works on paper, Dubuffet suggested that Paulhan contact him: "Fautrier, qui a naguère utilisé cette présentation, ne pourrait-il nous donner un conseil? Mais je n'ose m'adresser directement à lui pour le lui demander. Estimez vous qu'il serait importun de le déranger à ce futile propos?" Dubuffet to Paulhan, [4 March 1945], in: *DP*, 189-190. A short while later, Dubuffet pressed the issue with Paulhan: "Voudrez-vous avoir la bonté de vous entremettre (si toutefois vous le jugez opportun) auprès de Fautrier pour avis [...]?" Dubuffet to Paulhan, 16 [March] 1945, in: *DP*, 193.

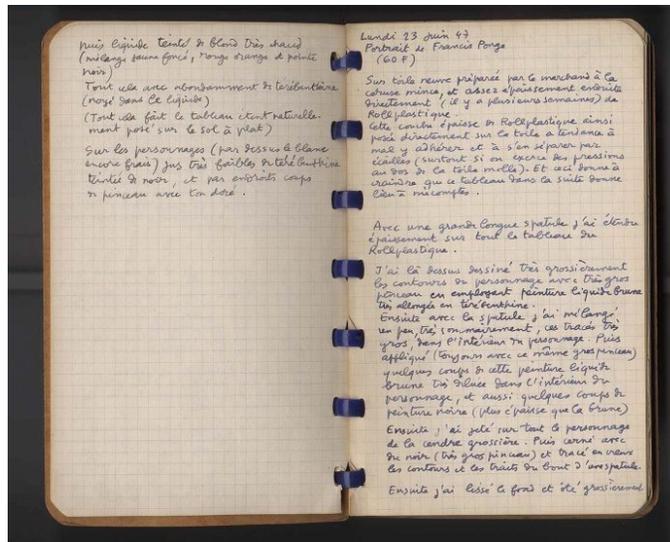
series of apprenticeships with tradesmen—housepainters, bricklayers, and a mason —"who thoroughly explained the use of these mortars, and I made them and used them with him".<sup>22</sup> Moreover, he sought out experts in the paint industry for information about the physical properties and chemical composition of the fixatives, emulsions, glazes, and varnishes on the market. When he began a new round of "technical studies" in the summer of 1946, he turned to "several chemical engineers who specialize in colors painting and varnishes", among them the chemist Albert Corduant, an employee of the paint firm Lagèze et Cages who assisted him with his "research on materials and techniques" by providing information on the various "new mastics and new mixes" commercially available.<sup>23</sup> Some of these were new materials, like Rollplastique and Spot Putty, which were used by housepainters and purchased over the counter in the hardware store (rather than a specialized fine arts shop). Not satisfied, Dubuffet made his own concoctions based on improvisation and gleaned from a host of behind-the-scenes players (merchants, suppliers, workmen). Lastly, during this period, Dubuffet began to inventory his own practices in detailed studio logs ( *carnets d'atelier* ) that can best be described as a time-lapse record of each painting's durational genesis (Fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> These logs are a remarkable document of Dubuffet's process. In each entry, he listed the materials he used (their weight, heft, cost, durability, etc.) and how he used them, specifying the sequence and method of application. Initiated in order to document his successes and failures, these notebooks also demonstrate Dubuffet's industry and drive, his openness to improvisation, and his steep learning curve.

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<sup>22</sup> Dubuffet to Chaissac, 24 June [1947], in: *PES*, vol. 1, 466-467: "j'ai fait dernièrement pour cela un apprentissage avec un maçon qui m'a bien expliqué l'usage de ces mortiers et je les ai faits et employés avec lui. [...] à bientôt on fera un petit stage de travail en commun, je vais arranger cela."

<sup>23</sup> Dubuffet to Maurice Auberjonois, 9 July [1946], Archives Fondation Dubuffet, Correspondence Dubuffet - Auberjonois: "Autrement que ça je travaille très assidument et toujours mes recherches de matériaux et techniques: j'expérimente toujours de nouveaux mastics et de nouveaux mélanges; je suis entré en rapport avec plusieurs ingénieurs-chimistes spécialisés dans les couleurs peintures et vernis, je compte bien mener mes expérimentations avec patience à bonne fin, je suis très passionné par ces recherches techniques. Je fais de grands tableaux représentants des façades d'immeubles locatifs parisiens."

<sup>24</sup> Dubuffet's studio logs are archived in the Fondation Dubuffet, Paris. His first recorded entry is in August 1946, with a detailed description of the genesis of his painting *Portrait de Michel Tapié*.



2 Pages from Jean Dubuffet's studio logs (1947-1950) showing entry of 23 June 1947. Fondation Dubuffet, Paris (photograph © Archives Fondation Dubuffet)

[10] Georges Limbour, Dubuffet's oldest friend and first critic, described his studio as a "curious laboratory"<sup>25</sup> in which the artist fabricated strange concoctions, mixing the homemade and the store bought, the hand-mixed as well as commercial emulsions from paint and water, plasters used by housepainters, and ready-made household paints such as Duco and Ripolin. As Robert Doisneau's 1951 photograph of Dubuffet in his studio (Fig. 1) makes manifest, in addition to the use of standard tubes of paint, Dubuffet used a variety of unusual liquids, powders, and pastes. In particular, Doisneau focuses our attention on the amorphous spread of a thick, viscous material resembling mortar in the foreground. Dubuffet adored the thick, mushy materiality of any kind of putty: "All sorts of putties fascinate me a lot."<sup>26</sup> At one point, he even tried working with toothpaste.<sup>27</sup> In 1946 Tapié describes Dubuffet's "primary material as a mix of white lead and whiting chalk" with a variety of ingredients including bitumen, lime, cement; an array of varnishes, drying agents, and glues; sand, loose pigments, pebbles, shards of mirror, broken bottles,

<sup>25</sup> Georges Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte: L'Art brut de Jean Dubuffet*, ed. Pierre Matisse, New York 1953, 42-46; reprinted in: *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, ed. Max Loreau, fasc. 2, Paris 1966, 121: "curieux laboratoire". On Dubuffet's materials, see Anny Aviram and Cecilia Winter, "Jean Dubuffet: Techniques and Materials", in: *Jean Dubuffet: Anticultural Positions*, New York 2016, 73-85.

<sup>26</sup> Dubuffet to Chaissac, June 24 [1947], in: *PES*, vol. 1, 465-466: "Toutes espèces de mastics me passionne beaucoup."

<sup>27</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [2 November 1944], in: *DP*, 144: "J'ai fait un très grand tableau sur les travaux agricoles entièrement peint à la pâte dentifrice."

frayed string and twine, straw, and gilded tin.<sup>28</sup> By 1947 Dubuffet had settled on a mixture of "a material made out of whiting chalk mixed with rabbit-skin glue" (ironically, two of the most traditional painting materials imaginable).<sup>29</sup> But before hitting on this winning solution, he went through a host of materials—asphalt, plaster, and even caulk or grout, ultimately abandoning them because they did not adhere to the support or dry sufficiently:

*I have used plaster umpteen times but it's not a practical material because it dries so quickly and then it only adheres to certain supports (I've also had paintings that I've found the next day in pieces on the floor) [...]. Asphalt slides and softens in heat and has also given me disappointments [...]. I've used common window sealant as well but unfortunately it doesn't really dry all the way through.<sup>30</sup>*

Dubuffet was looking for a viscous material with the right consistency to create a high relief but with a short drying time. With *haute pâte*, Dubuffet noted, "drying is a problem of capital importance".<sup>31</sup> Not only were his paintings not drying, but exposed, albeit accidentally, to a source of heat, they were melting down into viscous goo—slipping, sliding, dripping, dropping on to the ground in heaps and puddles.

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<sup>28</sup> Tapié, *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, 119: "La matière fondamentale étant un mélange de céruse et de blanc de Meudon, plus ou moins gras, plus ou moins liquide, allant de la matière du mastic--le vrai mastic des peintres en bâtiment--au liquide teinté qu'il applique en 'jetés'. Dubuffet y projette, y mélange du sable, du gravier, du goudron (ou des imitations de goudron aux couleurs à l'huile du gros vernis épais à devantures de boutiques, parfois teintés, du plâtre, mélange d'eau ou d'huile, des siccatifs plus ou moins ratés, du poussier de charbon, des cailloux, de la ficelle d'alfa ou de chanvre plus ou moins effilochée, des petits morceaux de miroirs ou de verres de couleurs, du Ripolin, du Duco."

<sup>29</sup> Dubuffet to Chaissac, 24 June [1947], in: *PES*, vol. 1, 465-666: "J'aime mieux la matière formée de blanc de Meudon mêlé de colle de peau."

<sup>30</sup> Dubuffet to Chaissac, in: *PES*, vol. 1, 465-666: "Je me suis servi maintes fois de plâtre mais c'est un matériau pas commode parce ce que [...] ça n'adhère que sur certains supports (j'ai eu aussi des peintures que j'ai retrouvées le lendemain matin tombées en morceaux. [...]) L'asphalte glisse et mollit à la chaleur et m'a donné aussi des déceptions. [...] Le vulgaire mastic à carreaux je l'ai employé aussi mais malheureusement il ne sèche jamais en profondeur."

<sup>31</sup> Dubuffet, quoted in Thomas Hess, "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", in: *Art News* 51 (3) (May 1952), 32-33, 66. In Dubuffet's words, a short drying time necessitated abandoning oil paint, "that horrible substance [...] that does not dry for a hundred years, darkening and changing the paint, and often destroying it, when it finally oxidizes and solidifies". Hess notes the composition of Dubuffet's homemade pastes from Swedish putty (a combination of spar varnish and an American product called Spackle, used by house painters to cover and fill cracks or blemishes in plaster walls or to retouch metal and wood surfaces).

[11] Dubuffet had begun exploring the decomposition of matter over time in the *Messages* series of 1944 created on weathered and abraded newspaper, but his *hautes pâtes* were going one step further. Undone by fragile, unstable materials, they were succumbing to the forces of entropy. Predicated upon the principle that physical forces in the material world move toward a condition of maximal disorder, entropy results in dissipation, not concentration; chaos, not cohesion. No precautions could stave off the inevitable ruin of a paste that had not been sufficiently dried or protected for long-term conservation. Mutant, Dubuffet's materials were going rogue. Time, heat, and gravity were working against them.

## Weighing In

[12] Matter was dripping onto the floor not only because of high temperatures or because of the material's inherently viscous properties but for the simple reason that there was so much of it. Dubuffet referred to the materials' enervation as "hippopotamus sudations" because, like the animal, these paintings weighed a ton. Here was "A series of canvases in which the lightest doesn't weigh less than fifty kilos".<sup>32</sup> Critics routinely specified the weight of his work ("These paintings on plaster board weigh almost two stone"<sup>33</sup>) and the thickness of his paintings (describing them as "a whitish mass three fingers thick"<sup>34</sup>). American critic Thomas Hess noted that "Dubuffet's pictures not only have the look and feel of sculptures but also the weight".<sup>35</sup>

[13] The question of weight is absolutely central to Dubuffet's matter painting—its trademark, one might say. In order to call attention to the works' materiality, Dubuffet needed, first and foremost, more matter, more stuff to throw in the public's face. Limbour explained that for Dubuffet, "The materials of traditional painting seeming too diaphanous and thin to him, he wanted to give it [a] body".<sup>36</sup> Not to be outdone by Jean Fautrier, his partner in *matérialiste* crime who required more than fifty tubes of white paste for his *Otages* (Hostages), according to poet Francis Ponge,<sup>37</sup> Dubuffet requested a surprisingly large amount of Rollplastique

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<sup>32</sup> "De briques et de Braque", in: *Ici Paris*, 21 May 1946: "une série de toiles dont la moindre ne pèse pas moins de 50 kilos".

<sup>33</sup> Georges Limbour, in: *Jean Dubuffet Paintings 1943-57*, London 1958, n.p.

<sup>34</sup> Guth, "Jean Paulhan", in: *Gazette des lettres*, 3 May 1947 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947): "une masse blanchâtre de trois doigts d'épaisseur".

<sup>35</sup> Hess, "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", 33.

<sup>36</sup> Georges Limbour, "Hautes Pâtes", in: *Action*, 17 May 1946; reprinted in: *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, fasc. 2, 121: "La matière de la peinture traditionnelle lui parut trop diaphane et trop maigre, il a voulu lui donner un corps."

paste from Corduant. Specifying the material by weight, he wrote: "I said fifty kilos, but I'm using a lot of it and therefore a hundred kilos would be better."<sup>38</sup>

[14] The provocation of *haute pâte* rests as much on its height (high pastes) as on its weight. Macadam, after all, is a heavy substance. High pastes are heavy pastes—he might have called them "*pesantes pâtes*" (heavy pastes)—and making heavy pastes required new materials and different techniques. Weight profoundly impacted how Dubuffet's *hautes pâtes* were made, exhibited, transported, and installed. As David Young Kim has rightly argued about matters of weight in Renaissance art,

*To speak of weight is to acknowledge artistic agency and ambition, the deliberate calibration of materials and support which involves risk, at times to the point of collapse. Weight ultimately deals with the 'force' of works of art, their heaviness and thus their presence, a physical and metaphorical characteristic that informs our aesthetic comprehension of things in the world.*<sup>39</sup>

It goes without saying that Dubuffet was not firmly established in the art world before the unveiling of his pastes in 1946. Loading the support with so much weight was a risky venture—a weighty decision, in both senses of the word—bringing with it entirely unpredictable consequences: notoriety if successful, but real hazards that could make or break his budding career.

[15] With paintings so choked with matter, their mass could deter potential clients and negatively impact their salability. Could such excessive, ungainly, heavy paintings even be mounted on the wall? And, if so, what special installation services would they require? One critic remarked:

*It is said that Jean Dubuffet loads his recent canvases with so many layers of paint that their weight causes serious problems, as a result, when they are hung. Will it*

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<sup>37</sup> Francis Ponge, "Fautrier à la Vallée-aux-Loups", in: *Spectateur des Arts*, no. 1 (December 1944), 21-22. "Sait-on que pour les sortes de plats, ou d'assiettes qu'il nous prépare, il use deux tubes de blanc (pour les plus petites), cinquante parfois (quand elles sont grandes). Qu'on me croie, j'exagère à peine." Referring to Fautrier's "épaisseur de la pâte", Ponge notes that his paintings sometimes took up to a year to dry: "Pour certaines parties (celles où la couche de blanc est particulièrement épaisse) elle mettra jusqu'à un an pour sécher." Ponge, "Note sur les Otages", in: *L'Atelier contemporain*, Paris 1977, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Dubuffet to Albert Corduant, 5 November 1946, in: Archives Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits, Paris: "J'ai dit 50 kilos mais j'en use beaucoup et donc ce serait mieux 100 kilos." This letter is also cited in: Chantal Bernicky, "The Organized Chaos of Jean Dubuffet: Investigating His Techniques and Materials", in: *AIC Paintings Specialty Group Postprints*, vol. 19, ed. Helen Mar Parkin, Washington, D.C. 2007, 110-117.

<sup>39</sup> David Young Kim, ed., *Matters of Weight: Force, Gravity and Aesthetics in the Early Modern Period*, Berlin 2013, 10.

*be necessary for qualified engineers to create a report (for each work and delivered with it) concerning the strength of the nail necessary to hang the work?*<sup>40</sup>

In an almost programmatic way, Dubuffet's *hautes pâtes* took on the full list of modernist biases—but, in particular, its disavowal of weight. If modern art, as Clement Greenberg later noted, acted "without regard to the laws of gravity", operating under the assumption "that matter is incorporeal, weightless, and exists only optically like a mirage", Dubuffet would make this property inescapable.<sup>41</sup> In place of immaterial lightness, facility, and ease, he would call attention to the artist's labor and the work's material presence, its sheer physical heft, as a burden for both the artist and his public to shoulder.

## Gravity Check

[16] Dubuffet might not have initially understood the full gravity of the situation. Whether due to their prodigious weight, to their exposure to a source of heat, or to their formation from unpredictable materials, many works that had been successfully elevated and mounted on the wall gravitated back to the horizontal prone position in which they had been made. Such heavy paintings made of capricious materials were a liability. With each added ounce, Dubuffet tempted fate and tested the laws of physics. The question was not how to make *hautes pâtes* but how to then hang them on the wall and keep them there. As their supports groaned under gobs and globs of material, the pull of gravity became a force to contend with, threatening to undo any vertical suspension.

[17] The weight of Dubuffet's pastes entailed, perhaps forced, a realignment of the canvas and a new *modus operandi*. Indeed, his "material turn" was predicated upon a physical turn of the support, a full 90-degree rotation from the vertical axis of the easel to the horizontal axis of the floor. Using newspaper as a model of what Leo Steinberg called the "flatbed picture plane",<sup>42</sup> Dubuffet began experimenting with horizontality in the *Messages* drawings of 1944 and the prints of *Les murs* and *Matière et mémoire* of 1945, both created on the horizontal surface of the table. When he adopted this unorthodox working stance for his paintings in the spring of

<sup>40</sup> L. G. Clayeux, Untitled article, in: *Paysage dimanche*, 13 January 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "On dit que Jean Dubuffet charge ses toiles récentes de tant de couches de peinture que leur poids de ce fait pose de sérieux problèmes d'accrochage. Faudra-t-il en venir à l'établissement des ingénieurs qualifiés, pour chaque œuvre et livrée avec elle, d'une notice touchant la force du clou nécessaire à la suspension?"

<sup>41</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in Our Time" [1958], in: *Clement Greenberg: Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, Chicago 1993, vol. 4, 55-61.

<sup>42</sup> Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria", in: *Other Criteria: Confrontations with 20th Century Art*, New York 1972, 84.

1945, a full three years before Jackson Pollock exhibited his drip paintings, the reception took note. Tapié notified the visitors to *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.* that the artist "often forms his mixtures by pouring them out from above the canvases placed flat on the ground".<sup>43</sup> Limbour specified that "He works [...] on all fours over the canvas laid flat on the floor, so that the thick liquids he pours rapidly from his pots don't run too quickly".<sup>44</sup> An entry in the exhibition's guest book went one further, addressing the artist directly: "Next time, paint directly by shitting on your canvas (from a ladder)—that would be even better."<sup>45</sup> Dubuffet's matter painting entailed an almost systematic per-version (a literal turning around) of the "civilizing process" described by Norbert Elias:<sup>46</sup> reversing the "passage of the simian to the human form" that Georges Bataille had detailed, by privileging crouching over standing.<sup>47</sup> The critics were outraged by Dubuffet's avowed "nostalgia and fascination with animality",<sup>48</sup> and they heatedly reminded him that "man finds it more convenient to stand on his feet than to crawl on his hands".<sup>49</sup>

[18] Dubuffet modeled his new working method for the public in two sets of photographs taken several years later in New York: those by Kaye Bell, in which he wears a white workman's jumpsuit and bends down over his canvas laid flat on the ground, and those by Rudolph Burckhardt for the May 1952 *Art News* "X Paints a Picture" column, where he is shown on all fours, "pounding and manipulating the material, called Spot Putty, with his hands" (Fig. 3).<sup>50</sup> Manifestly in dialogue with Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock, which had appeared in *Art News* a year to the day earlier, Dubuffet's self-presentation differs in one significant way.

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<sup>43</sup> Tapié, *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, 119: "projetée souvent ses mélanges en versant de haut sur des toiles mises à plat par terre".

<sup>44</sup> Limbour, "Hautes Pâtes", 121: "Il travaille [...] à quatre pattes au-dessus de la toile à plat sur le plancher, afin que ne s'écoulent pas trop vite les épaisses liqueurs qu'il verse allègrement de ses chaudrons."

<sup>45</sup> Comment by anonymous visitor in the exhibition's guest book: "La prochaine fois peigne directement en chiant sur votre toile (monté sur une échelle) - ça sera encore mieux." Archives Fondation Dubuffet, Guest book for *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, 1946.

<sup>46</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* [1939], New York 2000.

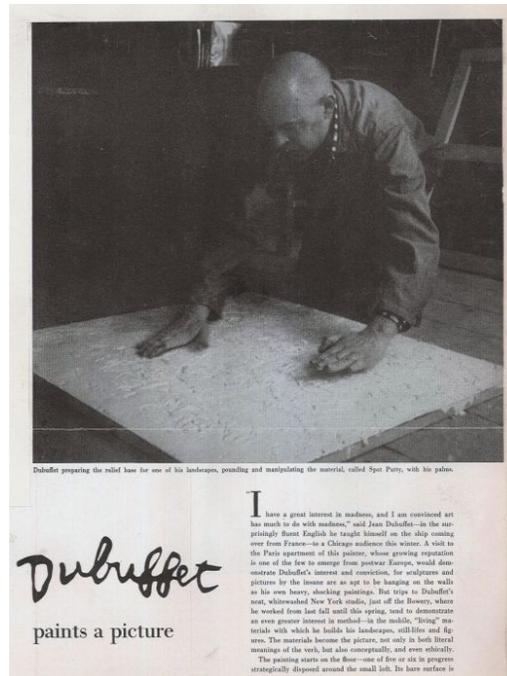
<sup>47</sup> Georges Bataille, "Architecture", in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Denis Hollier, Paris 1970, vol. 1, 171-172.

<sup>48</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [15 August 1954], in: *DP*, 672.

<sup>49</sup> Maximilien Gautier, "Le Conformisme a changé de camp", in: *Gavroche*, 23 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "l'homme trouve plus commode de tenir sur ses pieds que sur ses mains".

<sup>50</sup> Hess, "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", 32.

Although his canvas is spread out on the floor, Pollock does not deign to get down and dirty on his hands and knees.<sup>51</sup> In the accompanying *Art News* article, Hess specified that Dubuffet's painting "starts on the floor".<sup>52</sup>



3 Jean Dubuffet preparing a relief base in his studio with Spot Putty, from: "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", in: *Art News*, May 1952, 32; photograph by Rudolph Burckhardt (photograph © Archives Fondation Dubuffet, Paris)

[19] In practical terms, to work on all fours focuses one's attention on the ground. Dubuffet often praised "those who are turned toward the ground; I love the ground".<sup>53</sup> Limbour even wondered whether Dubuffet hated the sky, noting, correctly, that in his paintings the ground is all encompassing, engulfing the entire pictorial field save a few centimeters.<sup>54</sup> Dense and packed with matter, Dubuffet's *Paysages féeriques* (Enchanted landscapes) of 1946 are not aerated. In *Paysage charbonneux* (Sooty landscape) of May or June, the horizon line drops out save for

<sup>51</sup> Robert Goodnough, "Pollock Paints a Picture", in: *Art News* 49, no. 8 (May 1951), 38-41, 60-61.

<sup>52</sup> Hess, "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", 33.

<sup>53</sup> Dubuffet to Jacques Berne, 16 January [1949], in: *Lettres à J. B., 1946-1985*, ed. Jacques Berne, Paris 1991, 44: "ceux qui sont tournés vers le sol; j'aime le sol".

<sup>54</sup> Georges Limbour, "Jean Dubuffet ou l'imagination de la matière", in: *Servir*, 24 May 1945 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 1, 1944/45).

the narrowest sliver of sky on the upper left, as the thickly textured ground completely takes over (Fig. 4).



4 Jean Dubuffet, *Paysage charbonneux* (Sooty landscape), May–June 1946, *Haute pâte* on canvas or board, 97 x 162 cm. Private collection (photograph © Fondation Dubuffet, Paris; © VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

[20] The word *macadam*, so centrally placed in the exhibition's title, not only asked the public to focus its attention on the overlooked base materials discarded on and embedded in the city's pavement, it also emphatically pointed to both the horizontality of Dubuffet's mode of construction and his larger project of "bringing things down in the world".<sup>55</sup> By deploying horizontality in the *hautes pâtes*, Dubuffet signaled that painting would be demoted from its elevated pedestal and brought down to earth—reminded of its materiality. Heated up and weighted down with heavy, unstable materials, the *hautes pâtes* yielded to the force of gravity.

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<sup>55</sup> "Horizontality" was one of the four organizing categories around which Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss structured *Formless: A User's Guide*, their 1996 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, which reread a range of modernist practices through Georges Bataille's notion of the *informe*. First presented in the Surrealist journal *Documents* in 1929, the task of the *informe* was to "bring things down in the world". I am using the translations from Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., Minneapolis 1985, 31: "Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world." Krauss does not reference Dubuffet in her discussion of horizontality and he does not figure in her long list of artists who employed horizontality (among whom are Pollock, Morris, Warhol, Gutai artists, Smithson, Serra, and Ruscha). Bois cites my research on Dubuffet's "hippopotamus sudations" in the section on entropy (Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, New York 1997, 177). See Rachel E. Perry, *Retour à l'ord(u)re: Defilement in the Postwar Work of Jean Dubuffet and Jean Fautrier*, Ph.D. diss. Harvard University, 2000.

[21] Over two decades later, in his article "Anti-Form", artist Robert Morris argued that works that betray a "sympathy with matter" and "the inherent tendencies and properties of that material" will attend to "considerations of gravity".<sup>56</sup> And this "focus on matter and gravity as means", Morris goes on to write, "results in forms that were not projected in advance".<sup>57</sup> This is certainly borne out in Dubuffet's *hautes pâtes*. Flirting with theoretical interests that would be taken up two decades later (notably by Robert Morris, Lynda Benglis, and Robert Smithson), Dubuffet created precariously unstable works open to the naturally corrosive effects of time, temperature, and gravity. If, as Dubuffet later noted, "The two bases of culture are first the notion of value and second that of conservation",<sup>58</sup> he would make works that were difficult to hang, move, and preserve, posing real challenges for installation and transportation but also for conservation.

### Presentist, Ephemerist, Actualist

[22] Years later, in his autobiography, Dubuffet claimed that the meltdowns of his weighty *hautes pâtes* were neither signs of technical failure nor the unexpected by-products of his experimentation with heterodox materials and untested techniques. They were, he argued, the result of a deliberate decision to abandon all concerns of preservation and conservation: "I took the side of ephemeral works, rejecting all concerns for their conservation. Curiously, they were nevertheless barely altered subsequently."<sup>59</sup> The revisionist spin notwithstanding (as we know, many works in the series suffered significant alterations), Dubuffet's statement posits a poetics of ephemerality as the impetus for the *hautes pâtes*.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Morris, "Anti-Form", in: Id., *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Morris, "Anti-Form", 46.

<sup>58</sup> Dubuffet, *Asphyxiante culture*, Paris 1968; reprinted in: *PES*, vol. 3, 82: "Les deux ressorts de la culture sont le premier la notion de valeur et le second celle de la conservation."

<sup>59</sup> Dubuffet, *Biographie au pas de course*, in: *PES*, vol. 4, 489: "J'avais pris le parti d'œuvres éphémères, rejetant tout souci de leur conservation. Curieusement elles ne se sont pourtant, dans la suite, guère altérées."

<sup>60</sup> Max Loreau, the editor of Dubuffet's catalogue raisonné, insisted upon his receptivity to these modifications in the 1940s: "ces agglomérats sont plutôt fragiles, hasardeux, leur nature expérimentale empêche d'en prévoir le comportement et le temps peut les altérer. Loin de rebuter Dubuffet, leur caractère éphémère renforce au contraire la séduction qu'ils présentent à ses yeux. Il faut savoir que notre peintre n'est guère épris d'éternité et que le parti pris l'habite du périssable, de ce qui porte avec soi le principe de son propre oubli." Max Loreau, "Introduction", in: *Catalogue des travaux de Jean Dubuffet*, ed. Max Loreau, fasc. 2: *Mirobolus, Macadam et Cie.*, Paris 1966, 7-10: 8.

[23] In his writings, Dubuffet tirelessly declared himself "[I am] a present-ist, an ephemeral-ist. [...] What is the lifetime of an art production? Ten years. Twenty, thirty? No more in any case."<sup>61</sup> Dubuffet wanted to create objects that were, as he puts it, "of a very precarious nature".<sup>62</sup> Hermetically sealed glass encasements and artificially engineered climate control measures to preserve the work of art should be abolished and artists should embrace the work's eventual decay. In his introduction to the exhibition, Dubuffet's trusted sidekick Tapié argued that Dubuffet welcomed the inherent dynamism and changeability of the work of art and its slow deterioration by gravity, time, and exposure. It was, of course, no accident that Dubuffet's dirty little secret had been leaked to the press. Tapié had published what was transpiring behind the scenes with the artist's blessing, if not his active solicitation. Critics declared that "These outbreaks delight the artist".<sup>63</sup> Limbour, for one, noted that Dubuffet "enjoyed it a great deal when some of his paintings from the period of the *Hautes Pâtes* started to melt in his clients' homes, placed on top of radiators".<sup>64</sup> The decision to go public had been fully and strategically sanctioned in order to broadcast Dubuffet's disregard for the traditional values of easel painting; in addition to originality, uniqueness and genius, he would call into question the mandate of conservation.

[24] According to Limbour, Dubuffet was a "joker who made fun of time, of the long lasting duration of art, and ridiculed the traditional artist's defiance against time and death", pointing to his "certain taste for impurity and ephemerality".<sup>65</sup> Critic Léon Degand alerted his readers that "What pleases Dubuffet above all is the

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<sup>61</sup> Dubuffet, "Mise en garde de l'auteur", in: *PES*, vol. 1, 25: "Je suis présentiste, éphémériste. Hors du champ tous ces tableaux refroidis pendus dans les tristes musées. [...] Quelle est la durée de vie d'une production d'art? Dix ans? Vingt, trente? Pas plus en tout cas." It is worth noting that Dubuffet had just recently destroyed almost all of his work prior to 1943, the period he referred to as his "prehistory": A gesture intended to mark a new start, this destructive impulse was also a means of controlling his posthumous legacy.

<sup>62</sup> Micheline Sandrel, interview with Dubuffet for the radio program "Inter-actualités" at the occasion of the Dubuffet retrospective at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 16 December 1960, printed in: *PES*, vol. 4, 542: "D'une façon générale je m'évertue à ce que mes travaux soient assez bien fait techniquement, assez solides, mais il m'est arrivé certainement de faire des choses d'un caractère très précaire." This would apply to his butterfly collages and the sculptures he later made out of sponges and driftwood.

<sup>63</sup> Saget, "Du beau, du bon, Dubuffet" (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Ces manifestations égalent l'artiste."

<sup>64</sup> Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte*, 121: "Lorsque certains de ses tableaux de l'époque des Hautes Pâtes se mirent à fondre chez ses collectionneurs, au-dessus des radiateurs, il s'en amusa fort."

<sup>65</sup> Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte*, 121.

humility, vulgarity, and even the precariousness of the material".<sup>66</sup> Michel Ragon noted that "It pleased him that the finished painting continues to act like a living being that softens in the heat and contracts in the cold".<sup>67</sup> Referring to the paintings' heat-induced meltdowns, Limbour called Dubuffet's work an "art mobile": his paintings *moved*, he wrote; they "continued to live in front of us through unforeseen interactions between the materials—some were really sensitive to heat".<sup>68</sup> Hess likewise described Dubuffet's paintings as composed of "mobile, 'living' materials".<sup>69</sup>

[25] As early as June 1944, while he was working on the *Messages*, Dubuffet professed his allegiance to the "The law of ephemerality, of permanent deformation and reformation. Nothing is static".<sup>70</sup> Writing to Jacques Berne from El Goléa in 1948, Dubuffet reflected:

*One shouldn't keep things for a long time. One lives here, one constantly tramples on and shuffles over footprints. Footprints are delightful, molded in the fine sand as if in plaster. Men's feet, women's feet, children's feet [...] They don't preserve very well, they are effaced by other prints as ravishing, by other feet.*<sup>71</sup>

[26] Provisional and impermanent, a footprint in the sand is continuously effaced and erased by weather and time. Long before Robert Smithson used a sandbox to

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<sup>66</sup> Léon Degand, "Les règles du jeu?", in: *Lettres françaises*, 17 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Ce qui plait surtout à Dubuffet, c'est précisément l'humilité, la vulgarité, et même la précarité du matériau."

<sup>67</sup> Michel Ragon, *Dubuffet*, Paris 1958, 39. "Il lui plaisait que le tableau achevé continue à se comporter comme un être vivant qui se ramollit à la chaleur et se contracte au froid. Que la matière travaille, fonde, durcisse, s'écaille, craquèle comme elle le fait chez tant de peintre qui tiennent à l'immutabilité de leur création, c'est un catastrophe."

<sup>68</sup> Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte*, 121: "bougeaient, continuaient à vivre devant nous par des échanges imprévus entre les matières – certains étaient fort sensible à la chaleur".

<sup>69</sup> Hess, "Dubuffet Paints a Picture", 66.

<sup>70</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [7 July 1944], in: *DP*, 123: "loi de l'éphémère, de la permanente déformation et réformation".

<sup>71</sup> Dubuffet to Berne, 5 February 1948, in: *Lettres à J. B., 1946-1985*, 35: "On vit ici, on piétine et repiétine parmi des empreintes de pieds. C'est ravissant les empreintes de pieds, moulés dans le sable fin comme dans du plâtre. Pieds d'hommes, pieds de femmes, pieds d'enfants. Pieds d'ânes aussi, pieds de chèvres, pieds de chameaux. Ça ne se conserve pas très longtemps, c'est effacé par d'autres empreintes aussi ravissantes d'autres pieds. Tout le sol de l'oasis ainsi piétiné et repiétiné et rempli de marques et de signes est comme un immense cahier de brouillons, cahier d'improvisation, comme un vaste tableau noir d'école tout plein de chiffres, dans lequel on vit, on s'immerge, on se dissout, on se saborde."

illustrate the irreversibility of the entropic process, Dubuffet extolled the material properties of sand and its variability (Fig. 5).<sup>72</sup> In his drawings from North Africa, footprints cover the page, interlaced in an all-over pattern.



5 Jean Dubuffet, *Footprints in the Sand*, 1948, page from sketchbook "El Golea, II", ink on paper, 20 x 15.9 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York (photograph © Museum of Modern Art, New York; © VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

[27] Sometime after that first meltdown in Paulhan's apartment, Dubuffet pressed Paulhan, "Let's talk about our hippopotamus again [...]. In short, everything human is mortal. One shouldn't try to go against it. It's better this way [...]. Man writes on the sand. This suits me well; effacement doesn't bother me."<sup>73</sup> He signed the letter "Jean Dubuffet actualist", admitting that he was delighted with the modifications

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<sup>72</sup> Dubuffet wrote rather late in his career that "La formule de l'entropie est un meilleur sujet pour la peinture que les pommes de Cézanne". Dubuffet to Alain Pauzié, 23 July 1978, in: *PES*, vol. 4, 621. Pauzié worked at the Commissariat à l'énergie atomique. Pauzié, on Dubuffet's request, arranged a meeting with a Monsieur Cotsaftis on the subject of physics. Dubuffet wrote Pauzié (25 May 1978): "Je poursuis mes petites lectures de physique atomique avec l'espoir qu'à force de voir mentionner certains phénomènes je finirai par comprendre un peu ce dont il s'agit. Par exemple l'entropie." Fondation Dubuffet, Paris, Archives Alain Pauzié.

<sup>73</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [1944], in: *PES*, vol. 2, 232: "Reparlons de notre hippopotame. [...] En somme tout ce qui est humain est mortel. Il ne faut pas essayer d'aller là contre. C'est mieux ainsi [...]. L'homme écrit sur le sable. Moi ça me convient bien ainsi; l'effacement ne me contrarie pas."

befalling his paintings. In another letter, he referred to a painting provisionally titled *L'homme à crevasses* (The man with cracks):

*I will give you back the joker with crevasses. I also really like these crevasses and I would really like if moss and mushrooms grew on it and spiders made their webs in it and hornets their nests, between the teeth, or in the ears, and I really like that a painting could modify itself from one week to the next, that little things would grow on it and other things fall off and that little by little the painting would perish.*<sup>74</sup>

Dubuffet was calling for a painting that would gradually transform itself, remain vulnerable to temperatures hot and cold and the vagaries of time, morphing gradually and even supporting plant life, mold, and insects. For Dubuffet, the work of art is a living, breathing organism; it expands, hardens, withers, sheds, cracks. And it has a limited lifespan. Here today, gone tomorrow, it dies. He admitted: "Yes, I accept death, yes, for people and for things. I think that works of art die like people and one shouldn't try to resist it."<sup>75</sup> This was, as Limbour noted, "[a] completely pragmatic opinion by the artist on the mortality of the work of art":<sup>76</sup> one born of necessity, perhaps, but embraced wholeheartedly. Of a painting that had "melted horizontally" all over his office, Paulhan exclaimed with delight, "Oh! Now [Dubuffet's work] is smiling!"<sup>77</sup>

## Risky Business

[28] There is, of course, another side to this story, one that is considerably more nuanced. Although Dubuffet appreciated the unexpected cracks and crevices that materialized in the eponymous *L'homme à crevasses*, going so far as to fantasize about the plant and insect life it might support, he lobbied Paulhan to be discreet:

<sup>74</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [6 July 1946], in: *DP*, 309: "Je te redonnerai le rieur à crevasses. J'aime bien ces crevasses moi aussi et j'aimerais bien qu'il y pousse de la mousse et des champignons et que des araignées y fassent leurs toiles et des guêpes leurs nids, entre les dents, ou dans les oreilles, et j'aime bien qu'un tableau se modifie un peu de semaine en semaine, qu'il lui pousse des petites choses et qu'il en perde d'autres et qu'enfin peu à peu il périsse."

<sup>75</sup> Sandrel, interview with Dubuffet, 542: "Oui, j'accepte la mort, oui, pour les gens et pour les choses. Je crois que les œuvres d'art meurent comme les gens et il ne faut pas chercher à s'y opposer."

<sup>76</sup> Limbour, *Tableau bon levain à vous de cuire la pâte*, 121: "une opinion toute pragmatiste du peintre sur la mortalité de l'œuvre d'art".

<sup>77</sup> On July 10, 1946, Jean Galtier-Boissière wrote: "Fervent de peinture d'avant-garde, Paulhan a accroché dans son bureau de la NRF un Dubuffet. Hier, il s'aperçoit que le tableau réalisé au moyen de détritrus divers, s'est fendu horizontalement: 'Oh! Voilà maintenant qu'il sourit!' S'exclame-t-il charmé." Jean Galtier-Boissière, *Journal 1940-1950*, Paris 1992, 674; also cited in: *DP*, 309, n. 2.

*But it's a lot to ask these sorts of tastes from the visitors of the N.R.F. and seeing as we are not agitators let's keep these tastes to ourselves. I made my asphalt poorly, it isn't hard enough, I put too much bitumen in it, and so it stayed soft, hence the slippage of the eye and tooth. But when an eye and a tooth start to wander one doesn't know where they'll stop and so it's asking too much of visitors to the office, but I'll bring it to you for you to keep at your place.*<sup>78</sup>

Several years later, Dubuffet would take Paulhan to task for playing to the public.<sup>79</sup> Yet, here he is, in hush-hush tones, suggesting (or strongly requesting) that this remain between them, a secret to be guarded that the public is neither ready nor willing to understand. Noticing that several pebbles had become dislodged, he quickly and preemptively sent Paulhan an official letter, in a business language, informing him that he had replaced "our 'haute pâte' product" by "another, equivalent product and more suitable to convince our visitors of the good solidity of our products".<sup>80</sup> Couching his concern in terms of customer satisfaction, he insures product reliability, even offering his clients an extended warranty coupled with an after-sales service to repair future such mishaps (wayward eyes and slippery teeth).

[29] In fact, even at the first manifestation of the sudations, Dubuffet had responded with alarm. If we go back and reread those first letters and disregard the yarn Dubuffet spun for the public, it is clear that he was concerned. Time and again he wrote Paulhan giving him assurances that *this* painting (*Profil genre aztèque*, Fig. 6), "won't run again".<sup>81</sup> Featuring a man smiling broadly, waving his hand in welcome, *Profil genre aztèque* (Aztec type profile) is dedicated on the back "to Germaine and Jean, 1 January 1946. Happy New Year, J. D.". Dubuffet's varnish was the culprit; it wasn't holding the heavy black pastes adequately.

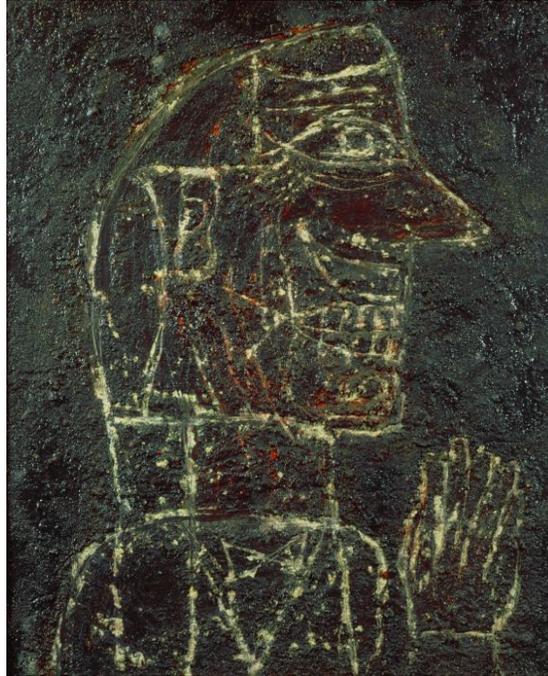
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<sup>78</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [6 July 1946], in: *DP*, 309.

<sup>79</sup> In a letter to René de Solier, Dubuffet refers to Paulhan as an "homme de cour" (19 December 1952), in: *PES*, vol. 4, 142. Dubuffet wrote to Berne in March 1951: "Je me suis fâché avec Paulhan et je m'en trouve très bien. Mes relations, prétendues amicales, avec cet homme dont les goûts sont tants à l'opposé des miens, n'ont jamais eu aucun sens. C'est à l'occasion du prix littéraire dont le conseil municipal de Paris l'a gratifié que j'ai pris l'initiative de rompre toutes relations avec lui. Je n'aime pas les veaux gras primés de concours agricoles: j'aime les vieux loups intraitables." *Lettres à J. B., 1946-1985*, 70.

<sup>80</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [5 July 1946], in: *DP*, 308: "Notre article 'Haute pâte' de La NRF [*Nouvelle Revue Française*] m'ayant un peu inquiété mercredi (un œil et une dent paraissent enclins à se promener un peu), je l'ai, dans l'après-midi, remplacé par un autre article équivalent et plus propre à convaincre tes visiteurs de la bonne solidité de nos produits."

<sup>81</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, [26 March 1946], in: *DP*, 295: "Non l'Aztèque ne coulera plus! C'était ce sale vernis. Mais ça ne coulera plus."



6 Jean Dubuffet, *Profil genre aztèque* (Aztec type profile), November 1945, oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm. Private collection (photograph © Fondation Dubuffet, Paris; © VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

[30] Of another painting, he wrote anxiously that

*I am very upset by this phenomenon of hematidrosis concerning Homme des murailles. ... Nothing is more frightening than these flows that stain everything placed under the painting in the dirtiest way. I'm alarmed. And I worry a great deal about what the other paintings will do (the ones that are not sound). I ask Germaine for forgiveness. Maybe it's the heat of the Mirus [an old-fashioned brand of wood stove] that might have affected some ingredient in the composition of the pastes? I think that we can nevertheless put the painting back in the vertical position without it provoking these runs, for example, by heating it with a blowtorch so that whatever wants to run runs for once and for all.<sup>82</sup>*

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<sup>82</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, 15 [January 1946], in: *DP*, 274: "Je suis très alarmé par ce phénomène d'hématidrose intéressant l'*Homme des murailles* [...]. Rien n'est plus redoutable que ces écoulements, qui maculent de la façon la plus sale des objets se trouvant sous le tableau. J'en suis consterné. Et je songe avec grande inquiétude à ce que feront les autres tableaux (ce qui ne sont pas sûrs). Je demande bien pardon à Germaine. Peut-être que c'est la chaleur du Mirus qui aurait ému quelque ingrédient entrant dans la composition des pâtes? Je crois qu'on peut néanmoins remettre le tableau dans la position verticale et que semblable fait ne se passerait ses envies de couler, par exemple en le chauffant avec une lampe à souder, de manière à ce que tout ce qui veut couler coule pour une bonne fois pour toutes." Dubuffet notes the heat of the "Mirus" as a cause for the meltdowns. Was Dubuffet's titular character, *Mirobolus blanc*, derived in part from Mirus?

Profoundly apologetic, Dubuffet was eager to assuage Paulhan's fears, rectify the situation, and rehang the painting vertically. But he was also concerned "about what the other paintings will do", those that had not been bought by friends and supporters, but by patrons for a lot of money. And what if this secret got out? Without a guarantee of the work's long-term conservation (its solidity and stability), the *hautes pâtes* wouldn't sell; this was risky business, and there was a great deal at stake.

[31] The critics fixated on the fact that Dubuffet's paintings might self-destruct at any moment. Noting that "the bitumen, pebbles, trash, mud that he mixes with an indescribable refinement are threatened by deterioration and destruction in no time", Frank Elgar wondered, "What remains of a painting which negates itself to this extent?"<sup>83</sup> Dubuffet's "masonry panels bloated and blistered, full of cracks and already decomposed in materials that break down, are not paintings that time will strengthen, but rather ruined pieces, announcing their decrepitude in advance".<sup>84</sup> Such precarious, unstable, and erratic materials were to be avoided, Jean Schlumberger cautioned, because "Art only begins with the goldsmith, which is to say with what lasts".<sup>85</sup> Citing the fact that "Placed near a stove, a Dubuffet starts to run. After several hours, one finds it completely melted down", one critic flagged the "friability of [Dubuffet's] materials" that "have the disadvantage of being fragile".<sup>86</sup> Critic and curator René Huyghe searched for a silver lining, suggesting that Dubuffet's paintings ironically made for a good investment, a two-for-one deal: "as good today as sculpture [in other words, on the ground in pieces] as they were yesterday as painting".<sup>87</sup> *Haute pâte* offered built-in comic entertainment, another critic snickered: "the cement, a jubilant substance, explodes as soon as spring

<sup>83</sup> Frank Elgar, Untitled article, in: *Carrefour*, 23 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Or, les bitumes, les cailloux, les déchets, les boues qu'il triture avec un raffinement innommable sont menacés d'altération et de destruction à bref délai. Que reste-t-il alors d'une peinture qui se nie à ce point?"

<sup>84</sup> Renaud, "Jean Dubuffet", in: *Paroles françaises*, 18 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "panneaux maçonnés, boursouflés, pleins de craquelures et déjà décomposés en matériaux qui se défont, ne sont pas des tableaux que le temps doit fortifier, mais des morceaux ruinés, accusant d'avance leur décrépitude. [...] Peinture mort-née, si l'on peut employer ce langage."

<sup>85</sup> Jean Schlumberger, "La Littérature continue: À propos de deux manifestes", in: *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 10 August 1946, 1: "L'art ne commence qu'avec l'orfèvre, c'est-à-dire avec ce qui peut durer."

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, "Dubuffet qui peint avec de la bouse de vache fait surveiller ses tableaux par 3 G. Men", in: *Samedi soir*, 1 November 1947 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947): "Les matériaux qu'emploie Dubuffet sur sa palette ont l'inconvénient d'être fragiles. Placé près d'un poêle un Dubuffet se met à couler. Au bout de quelques heures, on le retrouve complètement fondu."

comes, and provides an endless source of hilarity".<sup>88</sup> For Georges Ravon, "'haute pâte' painting has a huge advantage over the other procedures" for it offers a quick and easy (albeit dirty) disposal once one has tired of the work:

*All you need to do is to place it over a strong radiator for it to run in small viscous streams. You are thus not forced to keep it a long time after it no longer pleases you, as you have to with so many paintings.*<sup>89</sup>

[32] Quality assurance was, in fact, a frequent topic in Dubuffet's correspondence with his American dealer, Pierre Matisse. Matisse was altogether panicked and unnerved by the spontaneous "modifications" occurring.<sup>90</sup> Worried about the works' excessive weight, he warned Dubuffet to take his clients' needs into consideration. Of one particularly heavy painting on Masonite board, ironically titled *Extase au ciel* (Ecstasy in the sky), he wrote: "Ultimately the painting entitled *Ecstasy in the Sky* is so heavy that I doubt even the most fervent of your admirers will have the courage to hang it on their walls" (Fig. 7).<sup>91</sup> Laden with encrustations, the rough surface of the painting is wrinkled and creased, like the hard, craggy skin of a large animal.

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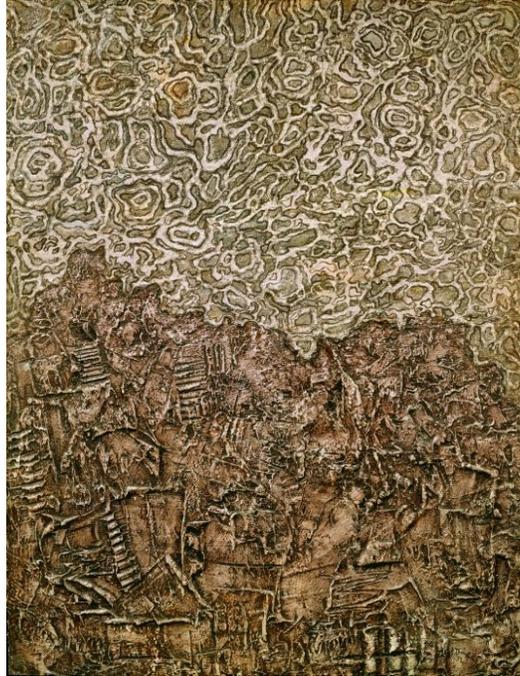
<sup>87</sup> René Huyghe, "Dubuffet", in: *Arts*, 17 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "aussi valable d'ailleurs aujourd'hui comme sculpture que comme peinture hier".

<sup>88</sup> Guth, "Jean Paulhan": "Au mur le portrait de Paulhan par Dubuffet. En ciment, épais comme une plaque tournante. L'avantage est que le ciment, substance joyeuse, éclate dès le printemps et figure une hilarité perpétuelle."

<sup>89</sup> Georges Ravon, in: *Vrai*, 20 July 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Au demeurant, la peinture en 'haute pâte' a un gros avantage sur les autres procédés [...]. Il suffit de la placer au-dessus d'un bon radiateur pour qu'elle s'en aille aussitôt en petite ruisseaux visqueux. On n'est donc pas contraint de la conserver longtemps après qu'elle a cessé de plaire, comme il advient de tant de tableaux."

<sup>90</sup> Matisse was also concerned that Dubuffet's *hautes pâtes* attracted dust and were impossible to clean, warning the artist: "N'oubliez pas dans la considération que vous portez à la matière, aux reliefs et aux matériaux employés dans vos tableaux qu'il est difficile de les protéger de la poussière et en certains cas impossibles à nettoyer." Pierre Matisse to Dubuffet, 22 October 1946, in: APM. When Dubuffet painted Matisse's portrait in the summer of 1947, it was under the title *Pierre Matisse, portrait obscure*, marking both how dark the palette and materials used were, but possibly also pointing to Matisse's difficulty in understanding Dubuffet's project (in the sense that he remained 'in the dark').

<sup>91</sup> Matisse to Dubuffet, 2 December 1952, in: APM: "Enfin le tableau intitulé *Extase dans le ciel* est d'un tel poids que je doute que le plus fervent de vos admirateurs ait le courage de l'accrocher à son mur."



7 Jean Dubuffet, *Extase au ciel* (Ecstasy in the sky), July 1952, oil on Isorel/Masonite board, 115 x 88 cm. Private collection (photograph © Fondation Dubuffet, Paris; © VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

[33] In another instance, Matisse alerted Dubuffet to a painting that "is peeling off in a horrifying way":

*[...] the more thinly painted areas are cracking, falling off in slabs and plates, exposing a virgin, immaculate canvas underneath. It's a bit worrisome and I am starting to shudder at the thought of these small pieces of painting that your American amateurs could find one day at the foot of their canvases. [...] The curve of existence has shortened considerably but still not to this point.*<sup>92</sup>

The picture Matisse paints—of little pieces of paintings strewn around, littering the floors of all those classy Fifth Avenue apartments—is a vivid one. Dubuffet responded dutifully by attending to his dealer's concerns: "I know how much cracks horrify people used to ordinary oil paintings [...] and so I work hard to avoid them and modify the composition of my materials toward this end."<sup>93</sup> When a canvas did

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<sup>92</sup> Matisse to Dubuffet, 21 May 1948, in: APM: "[...] la peinture moins épaisse, se soulève par plaques de cuisse en dessous une toile vierge et immaculée. C'est assez inquiétant et je commence à trembler à l'idée des petits morceaux de peinture que vos amateurs américains peuvent trouver d'un jour à l'autre au pied de leurs tableaux [...]. La courbe de l'existence s'est bougrement raccourcie mais tout de même pas à ce point."

<sup>93</sup> Dubuffet to Matisse, 29 November 1950, in: APM: "je connais l'horreur qu'ont des craquelures les gens habitués aux peintures à l'huile ordinaires [...] et donc je m'applique à

not submit to these new measures and Matisse's sense of alarm rose, Dubuffet invariably responded with offers to replace these ruined paintings with comparable, new, undamaged ones: "I will replace the two ruined paintings with others of comparable size."<sup>94</sup> Even years later, Matisse was still anxiously "working to restore and save [Dubuffet's paintings] permanently from the slow death that threatens them".<sup>95</sup>

## Painting in Danger

[34] Not only were Dubuffet's paintings accidentally self-destructing, they were under attack by the public. The headlines read "Painting in Danger".<sup>96</sup> With materials so fragile, large chunks of the *hautes pâtes* could be easily removed and, according to the critics, more than a few visitors took advantage of this unintentional giveaway: "The brittleness of his materials means that you can easily detach entire pieces of the canvas. Not many of the visitors to Dubuffet's exhibition pass this up."<sup>97</sup> But, more disconcerting still, canvases were being deliberately slashed, ripped, and defaced: "At the Dubuffet exhibition, place Vendôme, malicious visitors damaged the paintings."<sup>98</sup> One article ran under the title "A painter who paints like they did 3,000 years ago ... but his canvases are slashed".<sup>99</sup> Identifying these as iconoclastic acts, motivated by shock and outrage, it elaborated: "Scandalized by the aesthetic ideas of this painter-child, two students demonstrated their displeasure in a too raucous manner. They slashed through two paintings."<sup>100</sup> Describing the scene in the gallery as "an uproar", Michel Tapié counted not two but

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les éviter et à modifier la composition de mes matériaux pour cela".

<sup>94</sup> Dubuffet responded to Matisse's concerns in a letter dated 25 May 1948 in: APM: "Je ne suis pas surpris que les deux tableaux dont vous me parlez se décollent de la toile [...]. Il est bien entendu que je vous remplacerai les deux tableaux abimés par d'autres tableaux de même format."

<sup>95</sup> Matisse to Dubuffet, 11 April 1960, in: APM.

<sup>96</sup> Pierre Descargue, "La peinture en danger", in: *Arts*, 24 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946).

<sup>97</sup> Anonymous, "Dubuffet qui peint avec de la bouse de vache": "La friabilité de ses matériaux fait aussi qu'on peut facilement détacher des morceaux entiers de la toile. Ce dont ne se privent pas nombre de visiteurs des expositions de Dubuffet." This article also noted that visitors were drawing on the paintings: "Certains poussent même la plaisanterie jusqu'à faire des petits dessins sur les parties en reliefs des tableaux."

<sup>98</sup> Descargue, "La peinture en danger": "A l'exposition Dubuffet, place Vendôme, des visiteurs malveillants ont détérioré les tableaux."

<sup>99</sup> René Barotte, "Un peintre qui peint comme il y a 3.000 ans ... mais ses toiles sont lacérées", in: *La Voix de Paris*, 31 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946).

"six damaged paintings".<sup>101</sup> Critic Renaud wrote of contagion, spreading and gaining in momentum: "visitors overtaken by contagion strip the paintings and add unethical inscriptions on them".<sup>102</sup>

[35] Here too, as he had with the sudations, Dubuffet decided to publicize these depredations and defacements. Signs were posted. Guards were installed. Georges Ravon announced that "the mush" (la bouillie) of Dubuffet's painting *Dame au Pompon* "has, it seems, changed its appearance, after an attack that no one would have noticed if it hadn't been pointed out on labels" (Fig. 8).<sup>103</sup> Today, the painting hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.: a crudely drawn figure of a nude woman incised into a thick, impastoed muddy-brown ground composed of cement and gravel, with small shards of opaque green stones for eyes. Her so-called pompon of pubic hair is a jumbled knot of black string.

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<sup>100</sup> Id.: "Scandalisés par les idées esthétiques de ce peintre-enfant, deux étudiants ont manifesté leur mécontentement d'une façon un peu trop bruyante. Ils ont lacéré deux tableaux."

<sup>101</sup> Michel Tapié, "Dubuffet, the Terrible", in: *Paris News Post*, November 1950 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 5, 1950). Tapié goes on to note that a year later, "In 1947 [...] again a guard and railings [were employed] in an attempt to protect about sixty [paintings]". No doubt borrowing a tactic from Picasso, whose paintings had been guarded at the Salon de la Libération in the fall of 1944, Dubuffet kept this practice in place for his 1947 exhibition although it was claimed that the works were protected by three G-men; see Anonymous, "Dubuffet qui peint avec de la bouse de vache". See also Anonymous, "Toiles gardées", in: *Libération*, 25 October 1947 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947).

<sup>102</sup> Renaud, "Jean Dubuffet", in: *Paroles françaises*, 18 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "les visiteurs gagnés par la contagion écorchent les tableaux et leur ajoutent des inscriptions malhonnêtes".

<sup>103</sup> Ravon, "Deux monstres divisent Paris: Mirobolus et Macadam", in: *Vrai*, 20 July 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "[...] a, paraît-il, changé d'apparence, après un attentat dont nul ne se serait aperçu si l'on n'avait pris soin de le stigmatiser sur étiquettes".



8 Jean Dubuffet, *La dame au pompon* (Lady with a pom-pom), 1946, mixed media and oil on canvas, 80.6 x 64.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Chester Dale Fund, 1986.11.1 (© VG Bild-Kunst 2019)

Barotte likewise snickered that "This destruction would be barely visible if the gallery didn't point it out with a sign" which he qualified as "a bit promotional".<sup>104</sup> Poking fun at the drastic measures Dubuffet took, the reviews also correctly identify them as promotional tactics:

*Certain damaged canvases carry this sign in pencil: "The willful damage shown above was made by malicious visitors!" And an armed guard was placed to prevent the reoccurrence of similar incidents. A guard, guns—they're pretty good as instruments of publicity.*<sup>105</sup>

Posted to broadcast the power of these images to elicit such strong visceral reactions, the signs also issued an emphatic warning against further such acts.

[36] The situation escalated quickly as "a vigilant armed guard in uniform"<sup>106</sup> was positioned in the gallery to police further potential outbursts: "since this incident, a

<sup>104</sup> Barotte, "Un peintre qui peint comme il y a 3.000 ans": "Cette destruction serait d'ailleurs peu visible si la Galerie ne la faisait remarquer par une étiquette", "un peu publicitaire".

<sup>105</sup> Untitled article, in: *La Vie heureuse*, 12 June 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Certaines toiles, endommagées, portent cette indication au crayon: 'Les déprédations ci-dessus ont été faites par des visiteurs malveillants!' Et on a mis un gardien armé pour prévenir le retour de pareils incidents. Un gardien, des armes, ce n'est pas si bête comme instruments de publicité."

guard separates the adversaries with his unflappable calm".<sup>107</sup> The journal *Juin* alerted its readers that "[a] man, seated on a sort of throne, has taken on the defense of Dubuffet's canvases against the zeal of the iconoclasts. He is armed with a big revolver."<sup>108</sup> Pierre Descargues similarly reported that a stern armed watchman was safeguarding the gallery's artistic and commercial investments: "A guard, with a fierce countenance, has been stationed, armed with a revolver, to protect these artistic and commercial interests."<sup>109</sup> A year later, a caricature by illustrator Maurice Henry ran in *Combat* depicting two gruff uniformed policemen, gun in holster, guarding Dubuffet's self-destructing paintings from further attacks (Fig. 9).<sup>110</sup>



9 Maurice Henry, illustration for Justin Saget, "Léautaud", in: *Combat* (24 October 1947), in: Archives Fondation Dubuffet, Jean Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947 (© Archives Fondation Dubuffet)

<sup>106</sup> Tapié, "Dubuffet, The Terrible".

<sup>107</sup> Barotte, "Un peintre qui peint comme il y a 3.000 ans": "depuis cet incident, un gardien sépare les adversaires de son calme imperturbable".

<sup>108</sup> Untitled article, in: *Juin*, 21 May 1946 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 2, 1946): "Un homme, assis sur une sorte de trône, assume maintenant la défense des toiles de Jean Dubuffet contre l'ardeur des iconoclastes. Il est armé d'un gros revolver."

<sup>109</sup> Descargue, "La peinture en danger": "Un gardien, au visage farouche, a été posté, armé d'un revolver, pour protéger ces valeurs artistiques et commerciales."

<sup>110</sup> Justin Saget, "Léautaud", in: *Combat*, 24 October 1947 (Dubuffet, "Coupures de presse", no. 3, 1947).

## Double Bind

[37] Signs, guards, and guns? By introducing these measures in the gallery, Dubuffet aligned himself with the very institutions (galleries and museums) he railed against in his earliest texts. In January 1945, he wrote that works of art should not be "conserved for eternity" in museums but rather be "made for the moment", "like everything that is human, grows old and becomes obsolete [...]".<sup>111</sup> With their air-tight museum display cases and climate control systems, museums were, he wrote, "morgues of embalming".<sup>112</sup> Their prophylactic measures to protect, conserve and insulate the works from the effects of time, temperature, pollution and humidity were "the most detestable thing that exists and the most contrary to art":

*I assure you that museums are the most detestable thing that exists, and the most contrary to art [...]. Eliminate museums, eliminate schools, eliminate conferences, eliminate art critics, eliminate all reverence toward artists, eliminate art collectors, [...] eliminate the possibility to sell works of art or to benefit financially from them, eliminate all attention to art and artists, eliminate the word art from the vocabulary. But for starters and above all eliminate museums. That's the most nefarious thing of all.*<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Avant-projet d'une conférence populaire sur la peinture", in: *PES*, vol. 1, 49-50: "se conservent pour l'éternité"; "avec un très grand soin, on les faisait pour l'actualité, persuadé que ces sortes d'ouvrages, comme tous autres, et comme tout ce qui est humain, vieillit et devient suranné et, au bout d'un certain temps perd son sens, et alors on en faisait d'autres pour les remplacer, toujours d'autres." This text was written in January 1945 at Paulhan's request for a series of lectures on painting for a general public conceived of by Jean Guéhenno, then Inspector of Youth and Popular Education.

<sup>112</sup> Jean Dubuffet, "Ma donation au Musée des arts décoratifs", in: *Connaissance des arts* (June 1967), reprinted in: *Les Dubuffet de J. Dubuffet*, exh. cat., Paris 1992, 23: "ces morgues d'embaumement". This article was written on the occasion of Dubuffet's donation of 25 paintings and 150 drawings to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1967. He defended his volte-face, writing that his preference would be for works of art to be in the city and not "dans les sinistres musées. Je ressens qu'à les confiner dans les musées ... on les dote d'un caractère intouchable, interdit, qui détourne le public d'en faire usage."

<sup>113</sup> Dubuffet to Florence Gould, n.d., in: *PES*, vol. 4, 542-543: "[...] la chose la plus détestable qui soit et la plus contraire à l'art". The passage reads:

*Je vous assure que les musées sont la chose la plus détestable qui soit et la plus contraire à l'art [...]. Supprimez les musées, supprimez les écoles, supprimez les conférences, supprimez les critiques d'art, supprimez toute révérence à l'égard des artistes, supprimez les collectionneurs d'art, supprimez les subventions à l'art, supprimez les autorisations d'exercer métier d'artiste, supprimez la possibilité de vendre les œuvres d'art ou d'en retirer aucun profit, supprimez toute attention à l'art et aux artistes, supprimez le mot art du vocabulaire. Mais déjà en tout cas et pour commencer supprimez les musées. C'est de tout le plus néfaste.*

When Paulhan was nominated to the board of the Réunion des musées nationaux in the fall of 1945, Dubuffet advised him that he should "propose and see through, as your first and only motion, the suppression of museums".<sup>114</sup>

[38] In erecting a *cordon sanitaire* around his work, Dubuffet effectively recreated a museum space. Although, as one critic claimed, he had admitted "a weakness for all the liberties, including those of the mocking and cavalier public who [...] went so far as to steal certain inlays [...] or to move them around from one corner of the painting to the other",<sup>115</sup> it is quite clear that Dubuffet was more than a little disturbed by canvases being slashed, materials being removed and pastes melting.<sup>116</sup> When he solicited the viewer to "scrape where the painter scraped, scour, carve, knead, press where the painter has",<sup>117</sup> he did not intend for his invitation to be taken literally. He responded to these provocations with an unequivocal warning: the work of art must not be approached, touched, or defaced. Similarly, when his paintings began degrading, he worked hard to correct these technical malfunctions. He might have claimed that "The best is not to conserve anything at all",<sup>118</sup> but the works he displayed and sold were not meant to self-destruct à la Banksy. In fact, he went to great lengths to preserve his work for

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<sup>114</sup> Dubuffet to Paulhan, 16 October 1945, in: *DP*, 232.

<sup>115</sup> Saget, "Du beau, du bon, Dubuffet": "[...] avoue un faible pour toutes les libertés, y compris celles du public rieur et désinvolte qui, lors de sa dernière exposition chez Drouin, allait jusqu'à voler certaines incrustations [...] où à les déplacer d'un coin à l'autre du tableau".

<sup>116</sup> Dubuffet kept Paulhan apprised of the situation: "Je suis allé hier soir à la galerie Drouin: trois autres tableaux ont été nouvellement endommagés, le pauvre petit personnel de René Drouin (pour l'heure en promenade) s'en désintéresse tant que personne ne s'en était même aperçu." [31 May 1946], in: *DP*, 300.

<sup>117</sup> Dubuffet, "Notes pour les fins-lettrés", in: *PES*, vol. 1, 72: "gratte où le peintre a gratter, frotte, creuse, mastique, appuie où le peintre l'a fait".

<sup>118</sup> Dubuffet to Esdras Gosse, 4 February 1945, in: *PES*, vol. 2, 237: "le mieux est de ne rien conserver du tout". This letter was significant enough for Dubuffet to include it in his first book of his collected writings, *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre*, Paris 1946. It was a response to a request for Dubuffet's support for the conservation of picturesque sites in the historic port of Le Havre, Dubuffet's hometown, following the air strikes during the Liberation. The municipality planned to rebuild it as a historical reconstruction. Dubuffet categorically refused to sign the petition, arguing "Attention! Le goût pour les vestiges du passé, c'est très touchant, mais il est mauvais que ça prenne trop d'ampleur [...]. Moi je crois que le mieux est de ne rien conserver du tout [...]. Et puis il faut lutter contre cette équivoque malfaisante que l'art se confondrait avec une révérence pour le passé, une espèce de culte des morts, de nécrophilie. Or bien sûr c'est le contraire [...]. Laissons faire, allez."

posterity, not only in terms of documentation (by cataloguing and archiving his output) but in terms of technical improvements and conservation.

[39] Years later, in a discussion on Art Brut, Dubuffet admitted that he struggled with a "small personal internal debate"<sup>119</sup>: "I find myself in something of a double bind."<sup>120</sup> Ultimately, Dubuffet ended up, as he put it, "in [his] own trap",<sup>121</sup> deeply invested in the very institutions he so adamantly denounced. Although he professed an "aversion for property and permanence",<sup>122</sup> his attraction to entropic decay and ephemerality gave way to practical concerns of client satisfaction that rested on the material durability of his work. Designed to test the market, these ponderous, unstable *hautes pâtes* that he had launched as "escape attempts" from the cultural circuit were recuperated into it with the artist's tacit involvement.<sup>123</sup> Despite his

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<sup>119</sup> Dubuffet to Pierre Carbonel, 8 February 1970, in: *PES*, vol. 4, 613-614: "Vos très gentils et enfiévrés commentaires au succès de mes travaux à la Bourse culturelle ne réussissent pas à clore mon petit débat intérieur personnel sur la question. En vérité à l'origine j'ai voulu introduire dans le milieu culturel l'idée que l'art culturel est dérisoire et que l'art a-culturel est seul inventif [...]. Et je me suis trouvé pris à mon piège car je me retrouve aujourd'hui le présentateur de l'art brut au milieu culturel, victime de cette position prise à l'origine, tandis que je voudrais être de ceux qui ne s'adressent pas à ce milieu culturel, qui l'ignorent et sont ignorés de lui."

<sup>120</sup> In a late interview, Dubuffet responded to John MacGregor's question "How did you arrive at your anti-cultural views?" with the following: "I find myself in something of a double bind. I was always deeply interested in intellectuals, attracted by the world of ideas [...] I've never completely detached myself. After all, any interest of any sort in art or music, stems from culture [...]. It's not possible to be totally free of culture. Even the idea of language is part of culture. The idea of walking on two legs is culture [...]. My idea of deconditioning bit by bit, of total liberation, is a utopian idea. One can never totally escape from culture. It's just a question of more or less." John MacGregor, "Art Brut chez Dubuffet", interview with Jean Dubuffet, August 21, 1976, in: *PES*, vol. 4, 56.

<sup>121</sup> Dubuffet to Carbonel, 8 February 1970, 613-614: "Et je me suis trouvé pris à mon piège."

<sup>122</sup> Dubuffet to Graham Ackroyd, 7 June 1965, in: *PES*, vol. 4, 196: "aversion pour la propriété et pour la permanence".

<sup>123</sup> "Escape Attempts" is the title of Lucy Lippard's 2002 foreword to the second edition of *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed. Lucy Lippard, New York 1973, vii-xxii. In an earlier essay, Lippard had argued that cultural confinement could be circumvented through the dematerialization of the art object. Works in which "the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious" would bypass and upend the gallery system and traditional channels of display and reception. Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art", in: *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 1968), 31-36. The *hautes pâtes* are almost point by point the antithesis of the dematerialized, conceptual works Lippard held up. But Dubuffet originally thought of them in more or less the same terms, as "escape attempts".

desires for an ephemeral art put in "extreme danger", in the gallery it was business as usual.

[40] Jean-Claude Lebensztein examined the troubled relationship between Dubuffet's work and writings and the official institutions he alternately undermined and exploited in an early but largely overlooked article, "The Spaces of Art".<sup>124</sup> Reviewing the publication of Dubuffet's collected writings *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants* in 1967 with Germain Bazin's *Le temps des musées* and Pierre Bourdieu's and Alain Darbel's *L'amour de l'art*, Lebensztein concludes that "It's as if there were two contradictory systems in Dubuffet".<sup>125</sup> Yet Lebensztein argues that this tension between Dubuffet's desire to circumvent or sabotage the system ("pirater ce circuit") and his full participation within it ("retenu dans le circuit qu'il avait dénoncé") only begins in 1957, the year he begins to archive his work for the publication of the *Catalogue des travaux*. As the case of the meltdowns demonstrates, these conflicting pressures and internal inconsistencies were not born of Dubuffet's success in the 1950s; they were there from the very beginning of his career.

[41] Other scholars have addressed what I am calling Dubuffet's double bind with varying degrees of sympathy and suspicion. In his fascinating book on Dubuffet's engagement with Art Brut, Daniel Sherman points to the contradictions between Dubuffet's very vocal antagonism to the art world's legitimating institutions and his willingness to work with its agents (dealers, collectors, curators), arguing that "Dubuffet's hostility to museums and galleries was largely theoretical and polemical".<sup>126</sup> Marianne Jakobi and Julien Dieudonné take a harder line in their biography, casting Dubuffet as a hard-nosed, scheming self-promoter, a "sort of one-man band" who curated a "myth" of himself as a self-made man, completely "outside of any movements, networks or cultural institutions", "an enemy of his own Western culture".<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Jean-Claude Lebensztein, "L'espace de l'art", in: *Critique* 275 (April 1970), 321-343; reprinted in: Jean-Claude Lebensztein, *Zigzag*, Paris 1981, 19-47. See Germain Bazin, *Le temps des musées*, Paris 1967; and Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *L'amour de l'art*, Paris 1966.

<sup>125</sup> Lebensztein, "L'espace de l'art", 335: "Tout se passe comme s'il y avait en Dubuffet deux systèmes contradictoires."

<sup>126</sup> Daniel Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-75*, Chicago 2016, 118.

<sup>127</sup> Marianne Jakobi and Julien Dieudonné, *Dubuffet*, Paris 2007, 10: "à distance des mouvements, des réseaux et des institutions culturelles, à l'écart du marché et du milieu de l'art, rétif à toute promotion, étranger à toute influence et à tout héritage, ennemi de sa propre culture occidentale". For a wonderful review of Jakobi and Dieudonné's biography, see Sophie Berrebi, "Dubuffet's Myth by Julien Dieudonné and Marianne Jakobi", in: *Art History* 32 (2009), 639-642 ([https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00686\\_5.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00686_5.x)).

[42] But Dubuffet's rant against what he later called "asphyxiating culture" was, in this early period, more than just theoretical or polemical.<sup>128</sup> His "destructive spirit" welcomed the consequences (*séquelles*) of his experiments with materials (at least initially). Rather than hypocritical and insincere, as Jakobi and Dieudonné paint him, Dubuffet emerges here as genuinely ambivalent. His reaction shifted depending on his interlocutor and the context (that is, whose house or gallery these meltdowns were dirtying), at times amused and self-congratulatory and others anxious and apologetic. His correspondence makes abundantly clear how conflicted he was about these phenomena (of hematidrosis). Like his notoriously bipolar relationship to his public, he alternated from a need to antagonize and affront on the one hand to a desire to entice and appease on the other.<sup>129</sup> Playing both roles in a good cop / bad cop routine, he shuttled between two contradictory systems of provocation and compromise (not so contradictory after all, but mutually interdependent, as Thomas Crow has argued more broadly for the dialectic of avant-garde shock tactics and their recuperation by the culture industry).<sup>130</sup> Caught between contestation and consecration, he embraced failure as he tried to forestall it; extolled decay and yet attempted to halt it or reverse it altogether; promoted the ephemeral as he strove to ensure the work's longevity and stability. Rarely noted since, the story of the various meltdowns, mishaps, and iconoclastic attacks his *hautes pâtes* weathered highlights the uneasy balancing act Dubuffet played as he began to enter the spaces of art and negotiate his place within them and against them.

### About the Author

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<sup>128</sup> Dubuffet, *Asphyxiante culture*.

<sup>129</sup> I have argued that the scribbled notes in the *Messages* series also register this ambivalence, alternating from "I'm waiting for you" and "I want to talk to you" to "Keep your mouth shut". Janus-faced, they enunciate a desire for disclosure and communication but an equally strong impulse toward silence and foreclosure. They swing from the gracious if obsequious "Dubuffet respectfully salutes you" to the defamatory, raw venom of "Dubuffet is / a dirty bastard / a loser / ASSHOLE": the one portraying the artist as gracious and welcoming, the other casting him as a nasty misfit to be avoided. See Rachel E. Perry, "Les Messages de Jean Dubuffet", in: *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 140 (summer 2017), 3-33.

<sup>130</sup> Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts", in: *Modern Art in the Common Culture*, New Haven, Conn. 1996, 3-37.

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