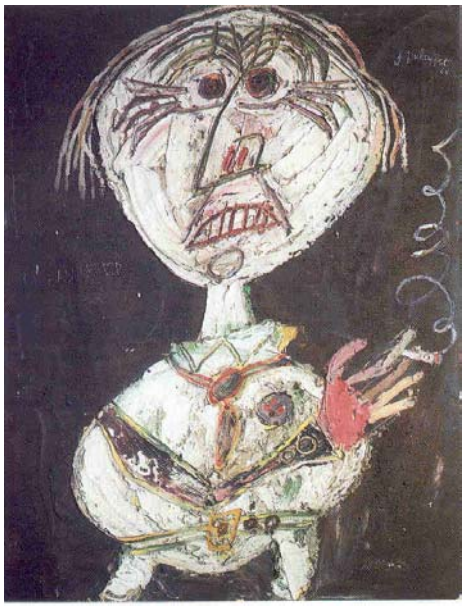
Dubuffet's vivid intensity—as in an early work, View of Paris, The Life of Pleasure (1944)—never slackened.

ART THAT CAN `MAKE *PEOPLE* LAUGH AND FRIGHTEN THEM, TOO'

by Helen Dudar, *Smithsonian*, June, 1993

Jean Dubuffet, the 'Tender Terrorist,' gave us painting in the raw and on the edge, but in time the art world caught up with him

In his final year, when he was burdened with age and emphysema, Jean Dubuffet made his last paintings. They were his farewell statements: angry scrawls of color charging across dense black backgrounds. He was 83 years old and, he announced he would paint no more. His American dealer, Arnold Glimcher, visiting Paris in 1984 to arrange the next Dubuffet show, found the new words disquieting. They evoked parched dried leaves, and it struck him that they granted the viewer no breathing space--a deft metaphor for the art of a man who was smoking himself to death.



Fautrier with Wrinkled Brow (1947) is one in a series of portraits in which the artist tweaked his friends.

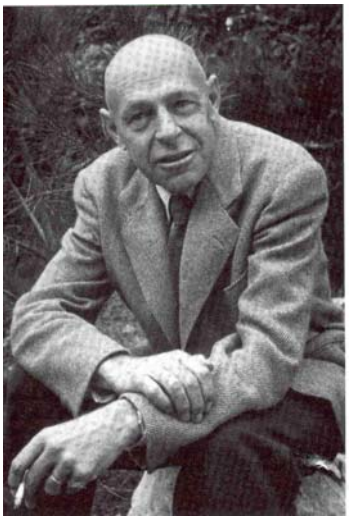
Dubuffet often attached an arcane or melodramatic label (*Materiologies, Texturologies*) to each new phase of his work, and this final series was to be called *Non-lieux*. Planning to install the works in the Pace Gallery, Glimcher needed a translation. Non-lieu, he learned, is the term in French jurisprudence signifying that, for lack of sufficient evidence, a trial has ended without a verdict. "You see," Dubuffet said with his customary fine irony, "at the end of my life, there isn't even the satisfaction of having been guilty."

Now here was an entirely uncharacteristic display of modesty. In a public career embracing more than four decades, Dubuffet was at least guilty of a galaxy of cultural transgressions. He had set out in the early '40s to subvert conventional notions of beauty, producing imagery that was seen as brutal, shocking, violent and grotesque. Some of his work actually drove the critics to nasty latrine language. Yet, it also bewitched a modest number of astute collectors into obsessive accumulation of Dubuffets. And, by example or osmosis, it instructed the next few generations of younger practitioners that anything-any image, any material-may be productively considered for the creation of art.

Dubuffet portraits looked to the earliest viewers like the scrawls of a wicked child. They were gouged into surfaces that had been encrusted with sand and tar, and sometimes pebbles and string, and even splashes of concrete. He made pictures using butterfly wings and tobacco leaves; he created textures by attaching steel wool and crumpled aluminum foil to canvas; he fashioned sculptures from sponge and driftwood and furnace slag.

Like Picasso, who lived and worked for more years, Dubuffet was a highly productive artist, turning out art in huge quantities. He hardly ever stopped creating. By rough estimate, there are more than 10,000 paintings, drawings, prints, assemblages, sculptures and assorted unclassifiable objects in homes, museums, storage and public plazas here and abroad. A small and nicely digestible sampling-just under 100 pieces-will be on display this summer from June 17 to September 12 at the ***Smithsonian***'s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. The show will not travel, and it will cover only the first half of Dubuffet's career, from 1943 to 1963, a period that some of his admirers favor over the later work.

An international explosion of interest



A small, bald man with a huge smile, Dubuffet was uncompromising but had a strong sentimental streak.

It is the city's first major exhibition of Dubuffet, merely one phase of what amounts to an international explosion of interest. In the past four years, there have been big retrospectives in Rome, Frankfurt and Barcelona, and in 1994, major museums in Paris and Zurich will be installing great feasts of the work.

Anyone requiring a reason for this will find useful hyperbole in most of the authoritative surveys of the art of our time. Many scholars at least agree with the Hirshhorn's director, James T. Demetrion, who organized this show and who believes that Dubuffet, along with Alberto Giacometti (***SMITHSONIAN***, September 1988) and Francis Bacon, must be counted "one of the key figures in European art of the postwar period." Others take the assessment a step further. Thomas Messer, who arranged a memorable Dubuffet retrospective in New York in 1973 when he was director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, believes that Dubuffet "is *the* great artist of the second half of our century. I think he's a magnificent figure, unmatchable really."

The public first encountered Dubuffet at a one-man gallery show in Paris in the fall of 1944, a few months after the end of the war in Europe. The critics were cool; oddly enough, a few collectors embraced the ***art*** at once and paid tidy sums of francs for it. Less than two years later, at the next show, a guard had to be posted in the gallery; the uniform failed to deter at least one enraged visitor bent on inflicting knife wounds on a canvas. Again, there were admiring buyers, and again, violent objections from the experts. One journalist-critic observed that in the wake of *dadaisme*, Dubuffet had perpetrated *cacaisme*. His 1947 New York gallery debut actually occasioned earnest protest from *Life* magazine, a crabby little editorial with a headline that complained: "Dead End Art: A Frenchman's Mud-and-Rubble Paintings Reduce Modernism to a joke."

The work was rough, even raw, with raucous homage to urban graffiti. Years before, Dubuffet had been deeply impressed by a German psychiatrist's study of the art of the mentally disordered. He called it *L'Art Brut*—"Raw Art"—and in the coming decades would obsessively accumulate an immense collection of work produced by the insane, prisoners, clairvoyants and others uncorrupted by textbook notions of what may properly be chalked on walls, sidewalks and paper. His own work could not be classified as *L'Art Brut*, since Dubuffet was neither untrained nor certifiably deranged, but it came as close as these handicaps would allow.

In a time when abstract art pretty much dominated the gallery world, Glimcher points out, the immediate impact of Dubuffet's work was to "open a new route to the figure." His impact on contemporary artists was "spiritual, rather than direct," according to Demetrion. Perhaps most important was his liberating influence. As Katharine Kuh, an art historian and a Dubuffet friend, observed, his gift, if any, to contemporary artists was a "disregard of conventional rules." This anarchic spirit inspired some of his

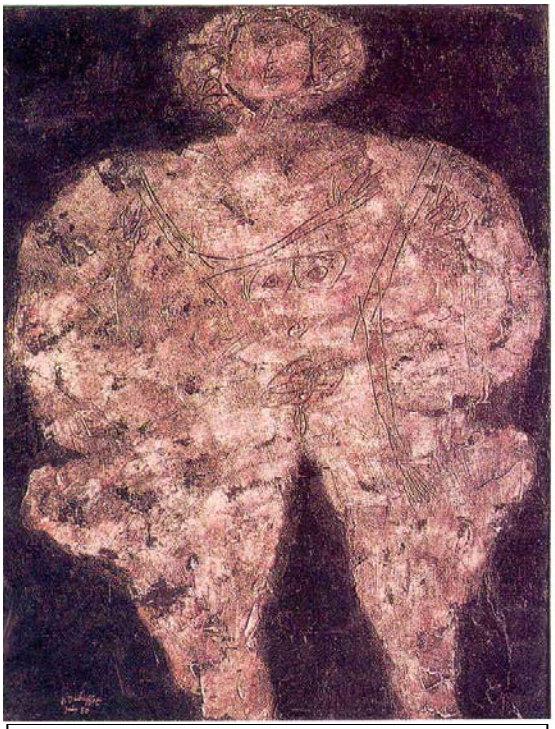
intimates among Paris' men of letters to write admiring articles describing him affectionately as "Dubuffet the Terrible" and the "Tender Terrorist." He repaid their support by making them look awful on canvas.

In his whimsical 1946 painting Touring Club, Dubuffet was reported to have shown himself as the hood ornament. When asked if this was true, he answered, "Yes, now you can see whether I am a good artist or not."

Almost inevitably, Dubuffet the rule-bender was the product of a serious, bourgeois family rooted in Le Havre and devoted to the domestic comforts provided by a thriving wholesale trade in wines and liquors. He once told an American journalist that he hated his "merchant family," and he appeared to have eventually severed relations with them. When he was well into his late years, Dubuffet traveled to Le Havre to inspect a museum retrospective of his work and, as he rounded a corner of a gallery, encountered an extremely elderly woman examining a painting. The woman turned out to be his mother, then not far from her hundredth birthday; they had not met for years. As he related to Glimcher, they had a "very nice conversation." Then he went back to Paris and never saw her again,

Dubuffet had left home at 17 to study art in Paris; dissatisfied with formal instruction, he abandoned school within months and gave up painting completely a few years later. In the next quarter of a century he traveled abroad; got married, fathered a daughter and was divorced; launched and abandoned a couple of wholesale wine businesses; and took up and stopped painting a second time. Finally, in 1942 at the age of 41, he decided that he wanted to spend his life creating art. A man of formidable intelligence, an autodidact, Dubuffet had also, by then, learned his way into most of the arts. He wrote with professional skill, and he seemed to acquire languages with the ease of a gardener gathering flowers. For a period in the late '40s he made several painting expeditions to the Sahara Desert, and to smooth his sojourns applied himself successfully to learning Arabic.

As a maker of and writer on art, Dubuffet was a worldclass contrarian, a killer iconoclast. He was anti-academy, anti-establishment, anti-history—in short, irrevocably opposed to cultural traditions as the Western world defined them. Painting, he argued, required neither schooling nor inborn talent. "Everybody in the world is a painter." Drawing from life was stupid. Most accepted work, including contemporary avant-garde art, was hardly worth looking at: "It suffers from being a house plant ... made by and for ... initiates." In what was a sketchy but apt description of the impact of some of his own work, he wrote, "Art should always make people laugh a little and frighten them a little."



Body of a Lady Rose Incarnate is an assault on the Western tradition of the female nude—not on women.

Pridefully, Dubuffet insisted that he never visited museums or galleries, although he seemed to know everything worth knowing about art of the past. When he did break his rule and visit the Guggenheim, Messer remembers, he walked past a wall of someone else's paintings with one hand shielding his eyes from the offending sight. He did find a few contemporaries acceptable. He approved of Claes Oldenburg, who, in his earliest work, was an unabashed devotee of Dubuffetism. But what most excited Dubuffet was art that he saw snaking along the borders of

madness—the mysterious, skewed world embedded in Louise Nevelson's black wooden constructions; the decay-riddled, death-obsessed imagery of Ivan Albright. Indeed, for Albright, whom he met on a 1951 trip to Chicago, Dubuffet did the unthinkable: he wrote a gushing forward to a book on the painter's work.

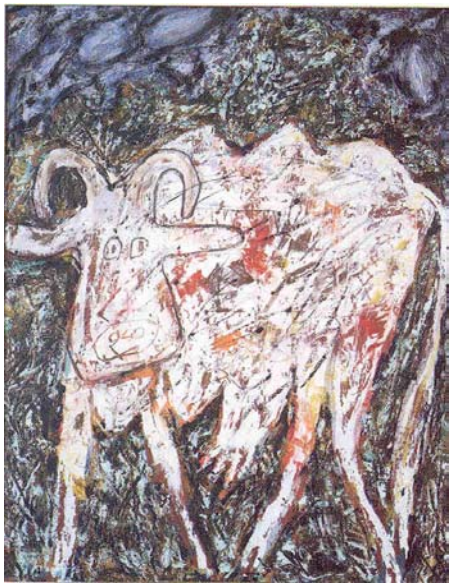
Nothing excited Dubuffet's contempt as much as classical Greek and Western standards of female beauty—an esthetic he considered miserable and depressing. "Surely I aim for a beauty," he said, "but not that one." People, he complained, insisted on misunderstanding him; they thought he found pleasure in wretchedness. Actually, "I wanted to show them that things they consider ugly and have forgotten to see are really sublime wonders."

Dubuffet was not a paragon of consistency. Lili Carlu, the woman who became his second wife, for example, was an acknowledged beauty, a spiritual twin to Man Ray's "Kiki of Montparnasse." Both were celebrated models in the '30s in the studios of that bohemian Paris district. One of the few examples of Dubuffet's early work that he did not destroy is a fairly academic, skilled oil portrait of a young, luscious-looking Lili.

Hardly anything dismayed the gallery-going world more than the blatantly unbeautiful series he called *Corps de Dames (Ladies' Bodies*), nearly three dozen paintings turned out at a brisk pace in a few months of 1950. They were memorably unladylike-savage images of nude women with deformed, bloated bodies, wearing such titles as *Miss Spider, Piece of Meat, The Hairy One and Landscaped Ruddy and Garnet Red*. To some observers, the works suggested a strident hostility to women. On the other hand, the female imagery was hardly more grotesque than many of his male figures. Dubuffet, of course, felt his ladies had been misunderstood. Having portrayed women no one would have coveted, he explained, "They are not objects of lust and carnal possession, but *places* of celebration. . . . "

In truth, in Dubuffet's earliest works people also resemble places, an important detail that tends to disappear in reproduction. His surfaces are alive with textures-vibrant swirls and lumps of darkish, dense materials lit by sudden dashes of sumptuous color. The textures somehow transform a painting so that a human figure is both a portrait and a landscape, a kind of lunar garden brimming with secrets. (And, since they don't come on the market very often, they command splendid prices, even in a depressed economy. At a dealers' art fair in New York this year, the price tag on a fine 1947 oil portrait of a male friend was $1,850,000.)

In the early years, Dubuffet produced singularly unflattering portraits of members of his intellectual circle, images not taken from life but dredged out of the unconscious, or, as he put it, likenesses 'cooked" and "conserved in the memory." Apparently no one complained openly, not even Pierre Matisse, who was repelled by the look of meanness Dubuffet had given his caricatured face. Matisse, who was the son of Henri Matisse, was Dubuffet's first New York dealer. He was too circumspect to tell the artist he hated the picture. An epiphany would come many years after he had first seen it. As he once told the story to a client, Matisse was sitting on the bed in a Paris hotel room one day, talking on the telephone, when he happened to glance up at the mirror across the room. The expression he saw was transfixing: it exactly matched the one in the painting that Dubuffet had titled *Dark Portrait*. Some subjects were treated with humor if not with tenderness. In 1954, Mme. Dubuffet, who was fragile physically, was sent away from Paris for a rest cure. On his walks through the countryside during his visits, her husband was captivated by the cows in the fields. The result was a succession of charming, funny paintings of deeply dopey bovine creatures.



Light-hearted *Cow with the Beautiful Muzzle* (1954) depicts an animal that gave Dubuffet a calm feeling.

In Beard of Stubborn Refusal (1959) the artist used a fragment of an earlier work for the beard itself.

A few years later, he was taken with beards, big beards and odd beards that, picture after picture, became far more important than the faces of the men wearing them. In 1961 he hurled himself into a cityscape period or possibly an anti-cityscape period. The paintings were busy, crowded patchworks of scenes of people in buses riding past stores and buildings bearing imaginative signs. In the painting he called *Le Commerce prospere (Business Prospers*), the company signs advertised "Cad and Company," "Shameless RiffRaff," "Swindler" and "Rotgut" and "Ministry of the Greased Paw."

By the time these pictures were ready to be shown, Matisse and Dubuffet had parted company for reasons never specified. It has been suggested that the rupture might have had something to do with the fact that by 1958 the dealer had stockpiled more than 200 Dubuffets for his own inventory. Although it looked as if he counted on a price explosion in the Dubuffet market, Matisse, in fact, was famously reluctant to part with art he had acquired for gallery stock. Morton Janklow, the New York lawyer and literary agent whose apartment walls are crowded with several dozen Dubuffet works, once courted him for months in pursuit of a painting that Matisse had shown. Janklow suspected the owner was Matisse himself, but the dealer would never admit it. When Janklow finally was allowed to buy it—a masterwork titled *L'Extravagante (The Extravagant Lady)*—he was astonished to find the price eminently fair.

Business Prospers (1961) depicts the same city as View of Paris, painted 17 years earlier. But this work is far more raucous, with its jumble of forms, and signs bearing epithets such as "Swindler" and "Rotgut."

If Dubuffet could be unforgiving—and by some accounts difficult, demanding and irascible—he was also easy prey to sentiment. Linda and Morton Janklow opened a package one day and found a delicate gouache commemorating their wedding anniversary. When Maurice Culberg, a Chicago asbestos manufacturer who had been one of his earliest American enthusiasts (and who had acquired 44 Dubuffets in a few years), fell ill, there was a get-well present: an engaging and now famous picture assembled out of butterfly wings (see below). And after Culberg's death, when his teenage daughter, Franka, went abroad for a year in Paris, she spent the first three months as a guest in the Dubuffet home. Like any proper bourgeois, Dubuffet, this symbol of anarchy in art, became a standard, concerned father figure: he worried when she stayed out late.

He looked like a creature of the forest, a small onionbald man with large winglike ears and large teeth that sometimes could make the large smile seem vaguely menacing. Even as Dubuffet grew prosperous, he

clung to the cheese-paring habits of wartime France. A pair of visiting teenage sons of American friends were treated to charm and lunch in the elegant court garden of his house on the rue Vaugirard; the food was served with a wine that Dubuffet actually boasted was *vin ordinaire*, the cheapest vintage, which householders bought by carrying bottles for refills to the neighborhood wine merchant. On one visit, Morton Janklow was astonished to discover that this successful artist drove a Deux Chevaux, the toylike chug-chug vehicle that the least-monied Frenchman acquired when trading up from a bicycle.

On the other hand, expense was never spared for the creation of art. In addition to the work space in his home, there were several other studios both in Paris and outside the city. Moreover, Dubuffet left nothing to chance. Catalogues raisonnes, summaries of a life's work, are usually posthumous affairs. In the '60s, Dubuffet set about arranging his posterity: two full-time employees tended a record of every piece he had ever made, and a Belgian scholar, Max Loreau, was assigned the job of organizing the effort and writing essays. In Dubuffet's lifetime, there would be 37 volumes—somewhat pretentiously called *fascicules*—with dated photographs of all his work or blank spaces denoting missing pieces. There would also be occasional comments by the artist, lists of owners of his art and, most engaging of all, snippets of press reviews neatly balanced between praise and vicious insult.

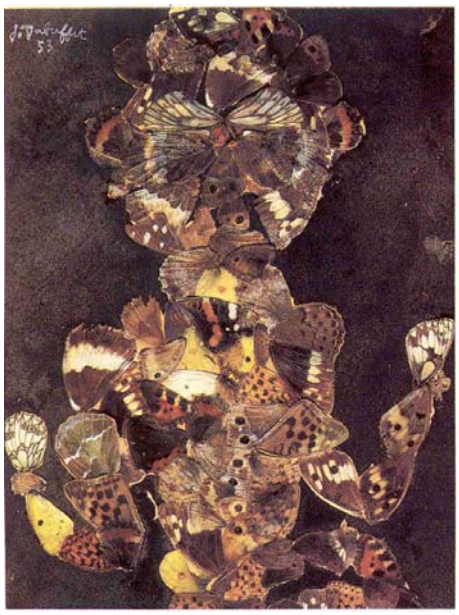
Even victims of his need to control could not help admiring his steely resolve. When Tom Messer was preparing the Guggenheim show that would also travel to the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris, Dubuffet had to be cajoled into cooperating. For him, the work of the moment was always more interesting than last year's art. Midway in the long preparatory period, he wrote to tell Messer that he had begun a project that he wanted included in the show. No problem, Messer said, innocent of what the future held. Gradually he learned it was a theater piece called *Coucou Bazar*, and that it would require stage sets, performers in costume, an acre of additional space and a bundle of money—about double what was already an unmanageable budget.

With ten-foot-wide *Tide of Hourloupe* (1963) and other works in the *Hourloupe* series, Dubuffet moved into big panels. The interlocking hard-edged design, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, grew out of doodles on a notepad.

Messer was finally to understand that in any conflict, Dubuffet required—actually, demanded—victory. "Ever so politely, in his exquisite French manner, he put before me an unstated ultimatum. *Either you do the first* Coucou Bazar *in its fullness together with the show or the show is off*." *Coucou Bazar* ran on Dubuffet's terms, and Messer, who had always been an admirer of the artist's, actually managed to forgive if not to forget the grief it caused him and his French colleagues.

The Hirshhorn exhibition stops at the start of a new cycle for which the *Bazar* sets and costumes were a climax of sorts. The last three pieces in Demetrion's show are paintings in the style Dubuffet called *Hourloupe*, an invented word that someone once noted resembled *entourloupette*—"swindle" in French slang. The designs were high-concept doodles, interlocking cells in three colors—red, blue and black—plus white, usually with stripes running in different directions. Although the work looked abstract, imagery was often hidden in a piece. In good time, *Hourloupe* graduated from easel works to extremely

large panels to sculpture, then to theater and even to architecture. The world's largest *Hourloupe* is the Villa and Closerie Falbala, a sprawling building with *Hourloupe* furnishings, standing outside Paris on property that also held one of Dubuffet's studios.



Dubuffet sent collage *Personage of Butterfly Wings* to American collector Maurice Culberg as get-well gift.

The *Hourloupe* phase was unusual in that it commanded Dubuffet's interest for a dozen years instead of a few months. It also brought him into the orbit of big business and popular collecting. The man who despised every centimeter of the contemporary art scene eventually accepted commissions from major corporations to design immense outdoor pieces, some of which can be seen in public places scattered throughout the United States. Collectors who could never have been persuaded to give wall space to the early works took to and bought the *Hourloupe* paintings; they were decorative, even cheerful (although on close inspection, those agitated designs turn out to be far from soothing).

When that phase ended, Dubuffet returned to new variations of the old graffiti paintings and later moved into an abstract vein that would end with the *Non-lieux*. Despite the emphysema, despite a painful spinal problem that caused a severe stoop, he turned out work at nearly the same old feverish pace. One year, when he reported that he had completed a series he called *Psychosites*, Arnold Glimcher came to Paris to select works for a new show. Without comment, he passed up several pieces that he thought were less successful. ("You had to be careful," Glimcher acknowledged recently, "because sometimes the 'awful' work was really great work and you just weren't ready for it.") Watching Glimcher make a selection, Dubuffet magnanimously pressed him to take "some of the bad ones. It would be interesting for people to see how badly I can paint." Later, when he said he was renouncing his life as an artist, Dubuffet reminded Glimcher that he had painted every day of his life for more than 40 years. In his deadpan style, he went on to observe that a work schedule of that sort could not be good for a person's health. In the months before his death in May 1985, Dubuffet wrote his autobiography. On his instructions, it may not be published until every person mentioned in it is dead.

New York collector Morton Janklow fell in love with *The Extravagant Lady* (1954) and finally won her hand.

By Helen Dudar

Helen Dudar last wrote on Griot New York, a dance collaboration between Garth Fagan, Wynton Marsalis and Martin Puryear, in September 1992.