

# DUBUFFET AND THE ANTICULTUR

RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.

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NOVEMBER 25, 1969—JANUARY 3, 1970

FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE HARLEM PREPARATORY SCHOOL

RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.  
27 EAST 79TH STREET, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021

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## DUBUFFET AND THE ANTICULTURE

On Tuesday morning, December 18th, 1951, Jean Dubuffet, his wife, and Alfonso Ossoli stepped off the *Twentieth Century Limited* into a Chicago blizzard. They managed to get to the Ambassador West Hotel. It had started snowing at 3 A.M. the previous Saturday and within twenty-four hours, ten inches of snow had fallen. By the time they arrived, eight-foot drifts lined the streets. The Dubuffet exhibition opened at the Arts Club on Tuesday afternoon. Dubuffet gave his lecture, "Anticultural Positions," at 11:30 Thursday morning. On Friday the snow started to melt.

The Chicago trip was an interruption, an important one, in the work Dubuffet had been doing in Greenwich Village since the previous summer. It is significant that Dubuffet made more of an impact in one hour on the hard core that pushed through the snow that Thursday morning than he had in five months on all the New York artists. The importance of the Chicago trip was not for Dubuffet but for a small group of artists, critics, and amateurs who at that time formed the only pocket of understanding for the revolution of which Dubuffet's speech was the manifesto. The reason was that easel painting, still alive in New York, was already dead in Chicago. Dubuffet had pointed the way. The Chicago group sensed it.

The Arts Club exhibition opened on Tuesday, December 18th, with a tea for Dubuffet, at which French-speaking matrons poured. It ran through January 23rd. There were twenty-eight paintings and four drawings and gouaches, dating from 1943 to 1951.<sup>1</sup> Fourteen paintings were lent by Maurice Culberg, an asbestos manufacturer who had become Dubuffet's first "lay" collector, then his advocate, and finally his devoted friend. A painting and a gouache were lent by Daniel Catton Rich, and two drawings and a painting by Katherine Kuh, who were at that time, Director and Associate Curator, respectively, of The Art Institute of Chicago. One painting was lent by the Morton Neumanns, who continued collecting Dubuffets and became his friends; and one painting by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Marx.

So Chicago, with its history of precocious collecting dating back to the nineteenth century, received Dubuffet as a celebrity and accorded him, before any museum, his first non-commercial exhibition. Like all visitors from the art world, he was whisked around the Art Institute and the Leigh Block, Marx, and Neumann collections. The William Eisendraths gave a dinner for him in Winnetka on Wednesday.

The only thing in the Art Institute that seems to have interested Dubuffet was Ivan Albright's *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do*. Dubuffet was later to render Albright a lengthy homage: "It is an unforgettable painting . . . worth going to the ends of the earth to see . . . I have never seen anything as frightening." He talks about the total abolition of "what were our canons of beauty." He refers to a "pullulating anarchy" in which "all the criteria of order and the archetypes of our former ideas of beauty" are annihilated and "for them is substituted a howling tumult, polycentric of many forms—a Gehenna of forms entirely delivered to delirium; to all beings a suddenly rendered liberty."<sup>2</sup>

Dubuffet asked to meet Albright, and the Albrights and Dubuffets lunched at the Racquet Club—a strange place for two aesthetic anarchists to meet—and later went to Albright's studio. Although Dubuffet had been studying for six months so that he could give his lecture in English, they spoke French and Josephine Albright translated.

As for the critical reviews of the Dubuffet show, Eleanore Jewett, when she got around in January to reviewing the exhibition in the *Chicago Tribune*, blasted it. The *Daily News* did not even review it. But Frank Holland of the *Sun-Times* and Copeland Burg of the *Herald American*

—an artist who doubled as critic to earn a living—understood its significance and prodded their readers to see it. Burg was to renew his acquaintance with Dubuffet in Paris the following September, and Dubuffet gave him a splendid drawing.

But the most important auditor at the lecture was the Chicago artist George Cohen. Though he never met Dubuffet, the responsibility seemed to fall to him to pass on the word. Cohen, the painter Leon Golub, and the sculptor Cosmo Campoli had, since the end of World War II, been preoccupied with a new reality they found in the primitive art at the Museum of Natural History. They had been exposed to Dubuffet's works and catalogues by Culberg and in them found articulation of the ideas which had been obsessing them. They had no more interest in New York "action painting" than in nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil*—undoubtedly less.

The present exhibition cannot cover comprehensively one of the few revolutionary thrusts in the history of art. Nor can we exhibit the work of more than a sampling of artists working from various of these "anticultural" positions. We cannot go back to the precursors like Duchamp who, although they were perhaps indispensable to what happened later, were cultural atheists rather than agnostics. The real antecedents were the genuinely unsophisticated, the uncontaminated cultures—the psychotics, the children—and these should be shown too. All this is for a large, ambitious museum to undertake. It should be done.

The exhibition does not, however, merely intend to reiterate Dubuffet's importance—which by now everyone acknowledges. It will show how Dubuffet anticipated so early in his work, and enunciated so clearly in his statement, a breakthrough into forms so radical that they forced us all to look at the world differently. It will show that Dubuffet had his first impact quite properly in Chicago—and that later, European artists like Yves Klein, Tinguely, and Christo, and Americans like Cohen, Oldenburg, and Van Saun, felt similar obsessions. It will tell the story of the devotion of a Chicago asbestos manufacturer to an artist and the artist to his friend and advocate. It will show how a tiny group of Chicago artists were teased along the same savage paths where Dubuffet had been, and struggled while New York splashed and dripped out the last easel paintings of the forties and fifties, until Central European expressionism and surrealism were finally dead and Oldenburg went to the Lower East Side and preached the anticulture.

November 5, 1969

R.L.F.

We want to thank Jean Dubuffet and Franka Culberg Jones for permission to reproduce the original manuscript notes for the lecture, "Anticultural Positions," given by Dubuffet at the Arts Club of Chicago, December 20th, 1951. We are also grateful for guidance and information provided by Dubuffet in preparation of the exhibition and catalogue. We extend our thanks to George Cohen and Claes Oldenburg for writing texts especially for this catalogue. For providing valuable information, we are grateful to Ivan Albright, William N. Eisendrath, Jr., Sidney Janis, Pierre Matisse, Morton G. Neumann, Muriel Steinberg Newman, Alfonso Ossorio, Ruth Culberg Rosenberg, and Rue Shaw.

<sup>1</sup>The present exhibition includes two paintings from the 1951 exhibition at the Arts Club of Chicago: number 1, *Campagne heureuse* (Arts Club, number 15), and number 6, *Femme pétrie d'argile* (Arts Club, number 20).

<sup>2</sup>Jean Dubuffet, in a commentary translated by Josephine Patterson Albright in the exhibition catalogue, "Ivan Albright," The Art Institute of Chicago and The Whitney Museum of American Art, Chicago and New York, 1964-1965, pp. 7-8.

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REQUEST YOUR PRESENCE ON  
THURSDAY MORNING, DECEMBER THE TWENTIETH  
AT ELEVEN-THIRTY O'CLOCK

A LECTURE BY  
**JEAN DUBUFFET**  
"ANTICULTURAL POSITIONS"

GUEST FEE  
FIFTY CENTS

I give these  
manuscript notes to  
Maurice E. Culberg  
as a very  
friendly  
souvenir  
Jean Dubuffet  
Chicago  
December 21  
1951

# ANTICULTURAL POSITIONS

1

Lecture given by Jean Dubuffet at the "Arts Club of Chicago" Thursday  
December 20<sup>th</sup> 1951  
at 11.30

I think ~~that~~, not only in the arts, but also in many other fields, an important change is ~~not~~ <sup>now</sup> taking place, now, in our time, in the ~~positions~~ <sup>frame</sup> of mind of many persons.

It seems to me ~~that~~ <sup>had</sup> certain values, which ~~had~~ <sup>had</sup> been considered for a long time as very certain and ~~firm~~ and beyond discussion, begin now to appear doubtful, and even quite false to many persons. And that, ~~on the contrary, certain~~ on the other hand, other values which ~~are~~ were neglected, or held in contempt, or even quite unknown, begin to appear ~~to certain persons~~ of great worth.

I have the impression that a complete liquidation of all the ways of thinking whose sum constituted what has been called Humanism ~~and~~ <sup>has been</sup> ~~was~~ fundamental for our ~~occidental~~ culture since the Renaissance,

is now taking place, or, at least, going to take place soon.

I think ~~the~~ the increasing knowledge of ~~thinking~~ the thinking of ~~the~~ so called primitive peoples, ~~for~~ ~~fifty years~~ during the past fifty years has contributed a great deal to this change, and especially the acquaintance with works of art made by these peoples, ~~and~~ which have much surprised and interested ~~the~~ the occidental public.

It seems to me that especially many persons begin to ask themselves if Occident has not many ~~the~~ very important things to learn from this savages. May be in many cases their solutions and their ways of doing, which first appeared to us very rough, are more clever than ours.

~~May be~~ It may be that ours are the rough ones. It may be ~~notions such as~~ refinement, cerebrations, ~~depth of mind~~ <sup>depth of mind</sup> perceptiveness are on their sides and not on ours.

Personally I believe very much in the ~~savage~~ values of savagery. I mean instinct, passion, mood, violence, ~~and~~ madness.

u de s u u u u u  
(to insist)

Now I must say I don't think at all Occident mean to say that the Occident lacks savage values.

Even I think that the values held up by our culture don't correspond to the real frame of mind of Occident - I think that the culture of Occident is a coat which doesn't fit him, which, in any case, doesn't fit him any more. I think this culture is very much like a dead language, without anything in common with the language spoken in the street. This culture drifts further and further from daily life. It is confined to certain small and dead circles as a culture of mandarins - It has no longer has real and living roots.

For myself, I aim for an art which would be in immediate connection with daily life, an art which ~~it~~ would start from the simplest means and the most common life borrowed from ~~this~~ daily life, and which would be a very direct and very sincere expression of our <sup>real</sup> life and our <sup>real</sup> moods.

parce que  
cette culture  
s'obstine à  
ne vouloir voir  
et respecter  
chez l'homme  
que les valeurs  
de la conscience  
et de la raison  
et à négliger  
complètement  
les valeurs que  
j'appelle  
valeurs  
sauvages;  
celles qui  
~~me~~ sont  
étrangères à la  
conscience et  
à la raison  
et qui cependant  
jouent un  
rôle de tous  
les instants et  
des plus agissants  
chez l'homme  
à l'Occident  
comme chez  
l'homme  
primitif

I am going to enumerate ~~a certain number~~ several points ~~which seem to me~~ concerning the occidental culture ~~which seem~~ with which I don't agree.

Here is a lack of respect for the beings

1

One of the principal characteristics of Western culture is <sup>the belief</sup> that the nature of man is very different from the nature of other beings of the world. Custom has it that man cannot be ~~so~~ identified, or compared in the least, with elements such as <sup>(wind)</sup> trees, rivers and ~~so on~~ - except humorously, or for poetic rhetorical figures.

The western man has, at last, a great contempt for trees and rivers, and hates to be like them

L'homme de l'Occident croit que les voies de son être sont ~~de~~ du côté des facultés, que l'homme possède en propre, et qui le distinguent des arbres ou des rivières; il déteste ressembler à, en fond, un grand mépris pour les arbres et les rivières et déteste leur ressembler.

~~But~~ <sup>on the contrary</sup> the so called primitive <sup>men</sup> societies loves and admires trees and rivers. He has a great pleasure to be like them. ~~(and I think I feel as they do) don't identify man with trees and rivers not for poetic rhetorical figures but they~~

Au contraire, l'homme primitif cherche l'accomplissement admire fanatiquement les arbres et les rivières; il se plaît à leur ressembler et croit que l'accomplissement de l'homme consiste plutôt à devenir un super-arbre, une super-rivière.

... man views the blossoming of the man is to be found  
by developing what, in the man, is like trees and rivers, and becoming  
something as a super-tree, a super-river.

5

He believes in a real similitude between man and trees and rivers. ~~They have~~ <sup>He has</sup> a very strong sense of continuity of all things, and especially ~~of continuity~~ between ~~the~~ man and the rest of the world. Those primitive societies have surely much more respect than western man for every being of the world; they have a feeling that a man is not at all the ~~owner~~ <sup>owner</sup> of the beings but only one of them among the others; and ~~they think every object is sacred and has its own soul and its own power, may be a soul and a power much superior to those of man.~~

Here is a lack of respect for the madness

②

My second point of ~~my~~ disagreement ~~The second point on which my position is not true of~~ <sup>with</sup> occidental culture is the ~~believes~~ following one. ~~The~~ Occi Western man ~~thinks~~ <sup>believes</sup> that the things ~~that~~ <sup>he</sup> thinks exist outside exactly in the same way ~~that~~ <sup>he</sup> thinks of them. He is convinced that ~~the~~ the shape

of ~~his~~ the world is the same shape as his reason. He believes very strongly, ~~the bases of his~~ the basis of his reason ~~is~~ is well founded and especially the basis of his logic.

But the primitive men has rather an idea of weakness of reason and logic; he believes rather in other ways of thinking.

~~For instance such notions as the impossibility of two contrary things existing at the same time, the necessity of a thing to be or not to be, the existence of a good and an evil and so on.~~

That is why he has so much esteem and so much admiration for the states of mind which are called by us delirium and madness. I must declare I have a great interest for madness. I am convinced art has much to do with madness and aberrations.

~~For myself I don't feel that so strongly. I think, if we cannot have not the possibility of conceiving in the same time a thing exists, while its contrary exists also in the same object, it does not prove at all that we are right this cannot be. For me it proves rather that our reason is weak and our logic is false. In the same way, our eyes cannot see in the same time all the points of a ball, and that does not prove at all that all these points do not exist in the same time.~~

~~That is why I don't repulse things because they seem absurd. And even on~~

*ce qu'on appelle la folie) ici parler de la folie et de la grande estime des peuples primitifs pour la folie; et des points de la haute valeur de la folie dans l'art*

the contrary, I have a conviction that our reason and our logic are false; ~~and, that we must~~ we must ~~rather~~ look at absurdities <sup>rather</sup> (than at logical ideas to find the real keys ~~to the~~ <sup>all</sup> to things, great or small ~~things~~). And I mean to say, even in the very small things of daily life.

I think this disposition of mind is also fairly characteristic of the so called primitive societies.

Here lack of respect for values of living (savage values)

3

Now, third point. I <sup>want to talk about</sup> ~~mean to say~~ the great respect occidental culture has for elaborated ideas. I don't regard elaborated ideas as the best part of human ~~from~~ function. I think ideas are rather ~~as~~ a ~~weakened~~ weakened rung in the ladder of mental function, something like a landing where the mental ~~operations~~ processes become impoverished,

If you refuse madness, refuse art! Similarities between madness and art.

8

like ~~a cross~~ an outside crust caused by cooling.

Ideas are like steam ~~to be~~ ~~formed~~ condensed into water by the ~~act~~ of reason and logic.  
contrast with the level

I don't think the greatest value of mental function is to be found at this landing of ideas and it is not at this landing that they interest me. I aim rather ~~for~~ to <sup>capture</sup> ~~catch~~ the thought at a point of its development prior to this landing of elaborated ideas

The whole art, the whole literature and the whole philosophy of Occident ~~rest~~ <sup>rest</sup> on the landing of elaborated ideas. But my own art, and my own philosophy, lean entirely on stages more underground: ~~as~~ I try always to catch the mental process at a deeper point of its roots, where, I am sure, the sap is much richer.

---

4

9

Now forth. Occidental culture is very fond of analysis and I have no confidence taste for analysis and no confidence in it. One thinks every thing can be known by ~~the~~ way of dismanteling it ~~and~~ or dissecting it into all ~~their~~ its parts, and studying ~~each of these~~ ~~parts~~ separately each of these parts.

My own feeling is quite different. I am more disposed ~~to~~ the contrary to always recompose things. As soon as an object <sup>has been</sup> ~~is~~ cut only in two parts, I have the impression it is lost for my study, I am further removed from this object instead of being nearer to it.

I have a very strong feeling that the sum of the parts does not equal the whole.

My inclination ~~leads me to reverse this~~ ~~process of isolating things and dissecting them into parts~~ leads me ~~to~~, when I want to see something ~~to~~

really well ~~is~~ to ~~regarding~~ regard it with its surroundings, whole. ~~When~~ If I want to know this glass on the table, I ~~don't~~ don't look straight on this glass, ~~but~~ I look ~~at~~ the middle of the room, trying to ~~see~~ include in my glance as many objects as possible.

~~And for instance~~ If there is a tree in the country, I ~~don't~~ don't ~~aim at all in~~ bring it into my laboratory to look at it under my microscope. Because I think the wind which blows through its leaves is ~~useful~~ necessary for the knowledge of the tree and cannot be separated from it. ~~And~~ Also the birds which are in the branches, and even the song of these birds. My turn of mind is to join <sup>with the tree</sup> always more things <sup>surrounding</sup> ~~with~~ the tree, and further, always more of the things which surround the things which surround the tree.

I have been a long time on this point, because I think this turn of mind is an important factor of the aspect of my art.

---

5

11

The fifth point, now, is that our culture is based on an enormous confidence in the language - and especially the written language, and belief in its ~~to~~ <sup>ma</sup> ~~translate an~~ ability to translate and elaborate thought. That appears to me a misapprehension. I have the impression, language is a rough, very rough stenography, a system of algebraic signs very rudimentary, which impairs thought instead of helping it. Speech <sup>is</sup> more concrete, animated by the sound of the voice, intonations, a catch, and even making ~~faces~~ <sup>a face</sup> and mimicry; ~~and it~~ <sup>and it</sup> seems to me more effective. ~~But~~ Written language seems to me a bad instrument. As an instrument of expression, it seems to ~~ex~~ deliver only a dead remnant of thought, more or less as cinders from the fire. As an instrument of elaboration it seems to overload <sup>thought</sup> ~~it~~ and falsify it.

I believe (and here I am in accord with the so called primitive civilisations) that painting is more concrete than the written words, and is a much more rich ~~and~~ varied instrument than it ~~is~~ for the expression and elaboration of thought.

I have just said, what interests me, in thought, is not the instant of transformation into formal ideas, but the ~~moments~~ <sup>moments</sup> preceding that.

My painting can be regarded as a tentative language ~~appropriate~~ <sup>fitting</sup> ~~fitting~~ for these areas of thought.

attempt



I come to my sixth and last point, and I intend now to speak of the notion of beauty adopted by occidental culture.

I want to begin by telling you in which my own conception ~~is different~~ <sup>differs</sup> from the usual one.

The latter ~~then~~ believes that there are beautiful objects and ugly objects, beautiful persons and ugly persons, beautiful places and ugly places and so fort.

~~nowhere~~ Not I. I believe beauty is ~~everywhere~~ <sup>everywhere</sup>. I consider this notion of beauty as completely false. ~~everywhere, every being being is prodigious~~

~~l'empaler  
à mort de  
beauté par  
pouvoir de  
fasciner,  
d'illuminer,  
passionner~~

~~and admirable~~ - I refuse absolutely to assent to this idea that there are ugly persons and ugly objects. This idea is for me stifling and revolting.

I think the Greeks are the ones who, first, have made this invention that certain to purport

hs

objects are more beautiful than others.

The so called savage nations don't believe in that at all and they don't understand ~~anything~~ ~~you~~ when you speak to them of beauty.

This is the reason one calls them savage. The western man ~~calls~~ gives the name of savage to one who doesn't understand that beautiful things and ugly things exist and who doesn't care for that at all.

What is ~~it~~ strange is that, for centuries and centuries, and still now more than ever, the men of Occident dispute which are the beautiful things and which are the ugly ones. All are certain that beauty exists without ~~any~~ doubt but ~~one~~ cannot find two who agree about the objects which are endowed. And from one century to the next it changes. The occidental culture declares, ~~at each century~~ beautiful, in each century, what ~~is~~ it

~~was~~ declared ugly in the preceding one.

The ~~is~~ rationalisation of that is that beauty exists but it is hidden from view ~~of~~ for many persons. ~~It is~~ ~~The~~ ~~percep~~ To perceive beauty requires a certain special sense, and most people have not this sense.

One ~~then~~ believes also it is possible to develop this sense, by doing exercises, and even to make it appear in persons who are not gifted with this sense. There are schools for that.

The teacher in these schools states to his pupils that there is without doubt a beauty of things, but he has to add that people dispute which things are endowed with that, and people have so far never succeeded in establishing it firmly. He invites his pupils to examine the question in their turn and so, from generation to generation, the dispute continues.

This idea of beauty is however one of the things ~~and~~ our culture prizes most and ~~custom has it~~ to ~~consider that~~ it is customary to consider this belief in beauty and the respect for this beauty as the ultimate justification of western civilisation and the principle of civilisation <sup>itself</sup> is involved with this notion of beauty.

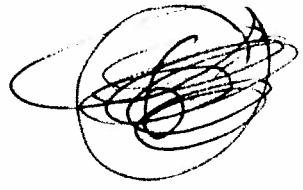
~~This~~ I find this ~~invention of~~ idea of beauty a meager and not very ingenious invention, and ~~above all~~ especially not very encouraging for ~~man~~ man. It is distressing to think about people ~~too corpulent or too~~ ~~old~~ being deprived of beauty because they are too corpulent or too old. I find even this idea that the world ~~where~~ we live in is made up of ~~at least~~ ninety per cent ~~of~~ ugly things and ugly places, while things and places endowed with beauty are very rare and very difficult to meet, I must say, I find this idea not very

exciting. It seems to me that the Occident will not suffer a great loss if it loses this idea.

~~But that~~ On the contrary, if he becomes aware that there is no ugly object nor ugly person in ~~this~~ world and that beauty ~~is everywhere~~ <sup>does not exist</sup> anywhere, but that any object is able to ~~fascinate~~ <sup>absolutely</sup> as hydrogen or carbon, that beauty ~~can illuminate him it become for him~~ <sup>is the most common thing of the world and that</sup> to become for any man a way of fascination and illumination. ~~all objects share in it alike, and I think~~

he will have made a good catch. I think such an idea will enrich life more than the common idea of beauty.

X  
X      X



And now what happens with art? Art has been considered, since the Greeks, ~~to~~ to have as its goal ~~to be~~ the creation of beautiful lines and beautiful color harmonies. ~~And then,~~ If one abolishes this notion ~~that~~ ~~the~~ what becomes of art.

I am going to tell you. Art, then, returns to its ~~real~~ real function ~~which~~ much more significant than creating ~~pleasing~~ shapes and colors agreeable for a so called pleasure of the eyes.

~~I do~~ I don't find this function, assembling colors in pleasing arrangements, very noble. ~~and~~ If painting was only that, I should not lose one hour of my time in this activity.

Art addresses itself to the mind, and not to the eyes. It has been always considered in this way by primitive peoples, and they are right. Art is a language, ~~an~~ instrument of

Knowledge, ~~and~~ instrument of expression.

I think this enthusiasm about the language of the words, which I mentioned before, has been the reason our culture started <sup>to regard painting</sup> as a rough, rudimentary, and even contemptible language, good only for ~~illiterate~~ illiterate people. From that, culture invented, as a rationalisation for art, this ~~the~~ <sup>myth</sup> of plastic beauty, which, in my opinion, is an imposture.

I just said, ~~I~~ and I repeat now, painting is, in my opinion, is a language much richer than that of words. ~~And~~ So it is quite useless to look for rationalisations in art.

Painting is ~~just~~ a language much more immediate and at the same time much more charged with meaning. Painting operates, ~~not~~ through signs which are not abstract and incorporeal like words, ~~but~~ The signs of painting are much closer to the objects themselves, ~~Afterwards~~ Further painting manipulates materials which are

themselves living substances. That is why painting allows ~~to go~~ one to go much ~~further~~ further than words do in approaching things and conjuring them.

Painting can also, and ~~that~~ <sup>it</sup> is very remarkable, conjure things more or less, as wanted, I mean; with more or less presence; that is to say: at different stages between being and not being.

At last painting can conjure things, not isolated, but linked to all that surrounds them; a great many things ~~in the same time~~ simultaneously.

On the other hand painting is a way much more immediate and much more direct than language of words, ~~then~~ much closer to the cry, or to the dance; ~~that~~ that is why painting is a way of expression of our inner voices much more effective ~~than~~ than ~~this~~ that of words.

I just said painting allows, especially, much better than words, ~~to express~~ one to express the various stages of thought, including the deeper levels ~~strata~~, the underground ~~of~~ stages of mental processes,

Painting has a double advantage over language of words. First, painting conjures objects with ~~much more~~ <sup>greater</sup> strength and ~~approaches them~~ comes much ~~more~~ closer to them. Second painting ~~opens~~ <sup>opens</sup> to the inner dance of the painter's mind ~~from~~ ~~for~~ ~~to~~ ~~access~~ a larger door to the outside. These two qualities of painting make it an extraordinary instrument of thought, or if you will, ~~but~~ an extraordinary instrument of clairvoyance, and also an extraordinary instrument to exteriorize this clairvoyance and to permit us to ~~have~~ <sup>get</sup> it with ~~him~~, ourselves also with the painter.

Painting now can illuminate the world with wonderful discoveries, can endow man

With new myths and new mystics, and ~~new~~  
reveal, in infinite number, unsuspected aspects  
of things, and new values not yet perceived.

Here is, I think, for ~~the~~ artists, a  
much more worthy job than creating  
assemblages of shapes and colors pleasing for  
the eyes.

---

Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions,"  
facsimile of the artist's manuscript notes for a lecture  
at the Arts Club of Chicago on December 20, 1951

GEORGE COHEN

October 11, 19

Dear Richard,

My congratulations and very best wishes to you on the opening of the new gallery.

I am also sending this message on the matter of anticultural convergence during an earlier dark age here in the anticultural center of the country (as I try to think about all this the SD: weathermen and a variety of police infiltrators are battling enforcers).

A lot of what I remember is indirectly associated with Exhibition Momentum; most of those whose work in any way related to Dubuffet were members—Claes Oldenburg was a late member. Exhibition Momentum was formed in Chicago by a constantly changing group of young artists shortly after World War II who were denied the right by the feudal lords of the Museum merely to submit to the local Art Institute juried exhibition. Before the war, during the late 1930s, I was a student at the Art Institute. There was a strong interest in German Expressionism, especially Beckmann, Kokoschka, Nolde, etc., and many student cliques had readily rejected what they felt to be the emptiness of French formalism. When we wanted something to see we often would go to the Field Museum to look at the then-not-well-displayed-not-thought-to-be-great art collections from New Guinea, New Ireland, New Caledonia and Old America. It held a hell of a lot more than form for us. Of course the New Bauhaus was then being established in Chicago so architects and other manufacturers could make neat packages according to the new absolute dictates of an authoritarian Germanic side show. The Bauhaus was anti-Hitler but not anti-totalitarian (including the new techronic totality).

In the late 1940s when Momentum was formed to set up its own exhibitions to counter Art Institute restrictions, the New Bauhaus faction and the other, the primitive-psychotic-popular culture-expressionist oriented group were often at odds. Nonetheless it got started because of the shared enemy. Maybe being against the Art Institute was as close as the designers ever got to anticulture.

The Momentum meetings and the exhibitions got things moving in Chicago—works came out of isolation and affected other people's works. We finally had a "school of art." It may have happened anyway but Momentum helped. Some of our work was developing distinct characteristics that were to be associated with Chicago. A lot of it seems old-fashioned now—magic, psychoanalytic psyche, folk art (we loved the very first statements of untutored adult beginners), schizophrenic art (we all seemed to know about Hans Prinzhorn's *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken*; later (in 1951?), Maurie Culberg gave me a copy of Dubuffet's *L'Art Brut Préféré aux Arts Culturels*). A Chicago critic later called what we had done "Monster Art," an unfortunate term that described a small facet of it all and helped to bury the rest of what we were doing (critics are the true anticultural agents).

How and when did I become aware of Jean Dubuffet? I have in my possession the catalogue of his 1946 Paris show, a gift from Cosmo Campoli in 1951. I had seen a copy of it a short time earlier—I believe Leon Golub had one. Seeing Dubuffet's work was surprising and stimulating. Its source seemed to be the source we were seeking (some Chicago artists have been called eclectic for things they did before they knew there was a Dubuffet).

A Chicago collector, the late Maurice Culberg, had been collecting Dubuffets—I think he was encouraged in this by the artist Rudolph Weisenborn with whom Culberg had been taking painting lessons—and interest in Dubuffet had grown to the point of his being invited to lecture at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1951. I knew a member of the club, Bill Eisendrath, who took me

with some of my friends, Leon Golub and Cosmo Campoli, to the lecture. The talk was about the value of savagery and the subject contrasted nicely with Dubuffet's trim black suit, dark tie, white shirt and long, black cigarette holder. After 18 years I remember clearly a statement about art schools and how little they contribute (certainly part of the French anti-art school tradition), and remember his saying they taught one how to "tickle the eye" (a prophecy of Yale Op?). We found many of our views reinforced by much of what he said, although some of it seemed remote to me at the time. I'm anxious to read the whole of it in your catalogue. That was the only lecture I ever attended at the Arts Club.

I'm not sure about the directness of Dubuffet's influence—after that time (1951) I was working on objects, or constructions, especially with mirrors, that were eventually to be called assemblage (Dubuffet's term?). In those years, perhaps up to 1954 or 1955, Chicago had some good things going—but it was too early and the scene was blanketed and blinded with New York action paint.

Anyway I was pleased with my objects and paintings and a lot of younger artists seemed to share my interest. Claes Oldenburg was among those who later joined the Momentum group. I first met Claes when he was an art editor of a Chicago magazine and he wanted an interview with me and photographs of my work. We maintained friendship after that initial meeting—he had a genuine appreciation of my dime-store source material. He later had a studio and once stored a work, returned from a Momentum show, for me. I think it was the board called *Sketch for a Game of Chance*\* which I'd done in 1953 or 1954. Recently Claes told me I had advised him to visit the American Museum of Natural History, especially for the American Indian Collection, when he moved to New York (I hope I did—I can't remember).

Dick, I hope you are right—maybe there is a link in all this. But I don't care to work it out much further (don't like to fill out forms with vital statistics).

I'd like to add that some of what I was doing then did not seem to relate to much else—for instance, I think *Anybody's Self-Portrait*\* is unique (at least it was in 1953). The flattened figures I had been doing were frontal but the mirror objects introduced a new kind of viewer confrontation with the viewer's specific image being the substance of the work. I believe that the interaction they set up took them out of the realm of "objects."

Perhaps, Dick, this answers some of your questions about those submerged Chicago years.

With kindest regards,

George

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\* Editor's note: *Game of Chance*, number 45, and *Anybody's Self-Portrait*, number 44, in present exhibition.

## CLAES OLDENBURG

Art to me is the record of perception of experience—of my mind in relation to different experiences. My study of art consisted of imitating the records of others, which was not limited to art in the museums, but included low art and art without aesthetic pretensions, such as the art of the insane, the art of children, the art of primitives. I located all these possibilities in myself, and my art became a search for variety in subjects, situations and conditions, social and psychological—unified by a style based on the facts of my own body.

The record of perception is always conditioned by the technique of representation, and it is a matter for me of identification—use of technique particular to a situation. What has accumulated as my work is the record of various viewpoints of experience, an art which can only be defined by attention to the particulars of its site and the moment of its making. This approach has freed me from historical style and any norms of beauty. To critics who do not know the underlying propositions of my art, the results of such a pragmatic approach are difficult to classify.

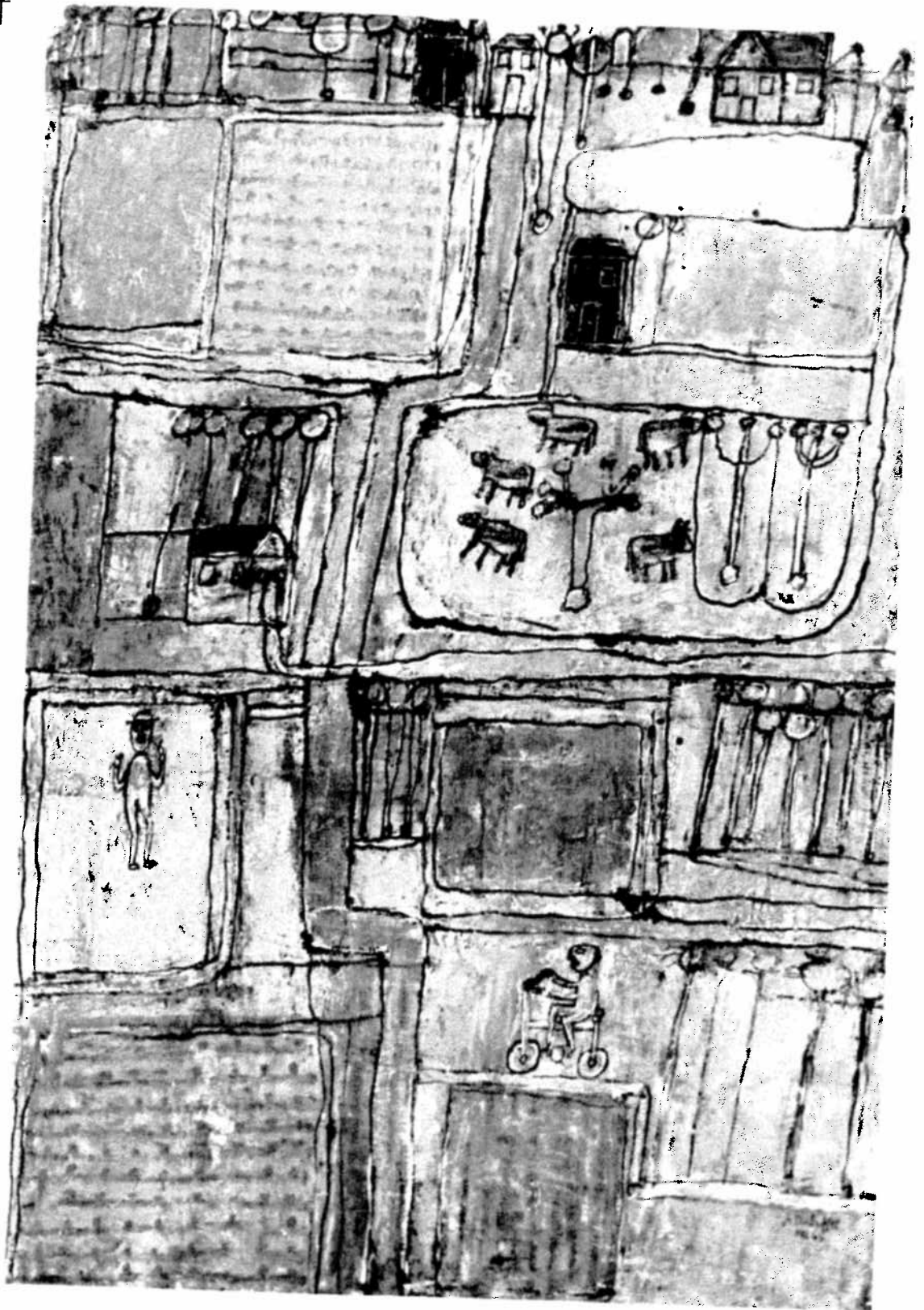
There is no linearity of development, only taking of different points of view, the use of perceptions of one site to their exhaustion—followed by relocation to another site. Hence, the periodic structure of the work: The Street, The Store, The Home, and the range of expression in each, objective to hysterical. I also do not discount clashes of taste within myself, and aim for a resolution of contradictions, which may occur in the work itself or in the interpretations of the work—by myself and others. I believe art defines the nature of experience, which is a complex of inner and outer. Any single work of art gives the concrete form of this, but is only a point in time, a little freezing of a flux of attitudes and perceptions, that cannot be captured as a whole. Taste is an object of my curiosity as an agent in the creation of form. A result either resolves all the factors involved or does not—it proves itself if it does, and therefore is indifferent to any canons of preference.

Jean Dubuffet influenced me to ask why art is made and what the art process consists of, instead of trying to conform to and extend a tradition. My work is not social commentary, decoration or entertainment, and I do not accept any one definition of nature enough to devote myself to its description. Such attitudes may be present in my work, but only because they are present in society and therefore condition my way of seeing and touching at one particular instant. My homages to Jean Dubuffet occur in the period of my most primitive site, the streets of the slums, because the key to his formulation came from a study of primitive mentality. But I do not lose his formulation when I move to glossier sites, or "sites in tradition" such as the monuments series, which involve re-perceiving already stated perceptions in cultural history by a technique of substitution.

C.O.  
Oct. 1969

JEAN DUBUFFET

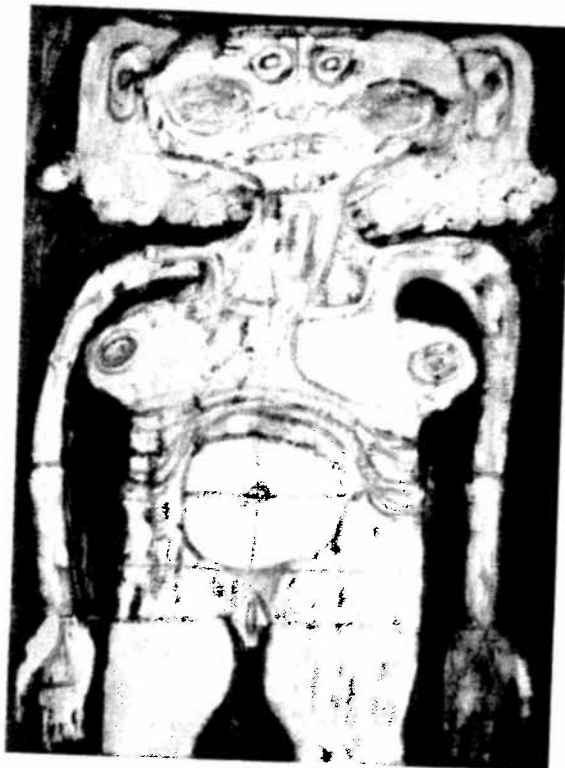
(French, born 1901)



1  
*Campagne heureuse*  
August 1944  
Oil on canvas  
51 3/4" x 35 1/8"



2  
*Danseurs*  
February 1945  
Oil, gravel and stones  
on canvas  
45 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 35"



3  
*Desnuda*  
June 1945  
Oil on canvas  
29" x 21 1/4"  
Collection Mr. and Mrs  
David E. Evins, New York



4  
*Homme à cravate rouge*  
August 1945  
Oil on canvas  
36 1/4" x 25 5/8"



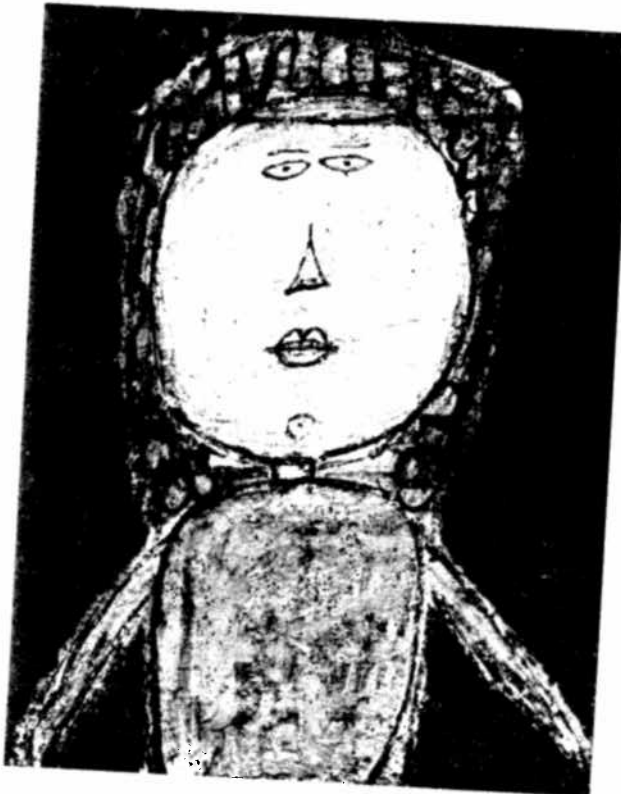
5  
*Gambadeuse d'asphalte*  
November 1945  
Oil, gravel and stones on canvas  
36" x 25½"  
Collection Mr. and Mrs.  
Jerome L. Stern, New York



6  
*Femme pétrie d'argile*  
February 1946  
Oil, glass, gravel  
and stones  
on canvas  
25 5/8" x 21 1/4"



7  
*Maast à crinière (Portrait de Jean Paulhan)*  
September 1946  
Oil on board  
43 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ "



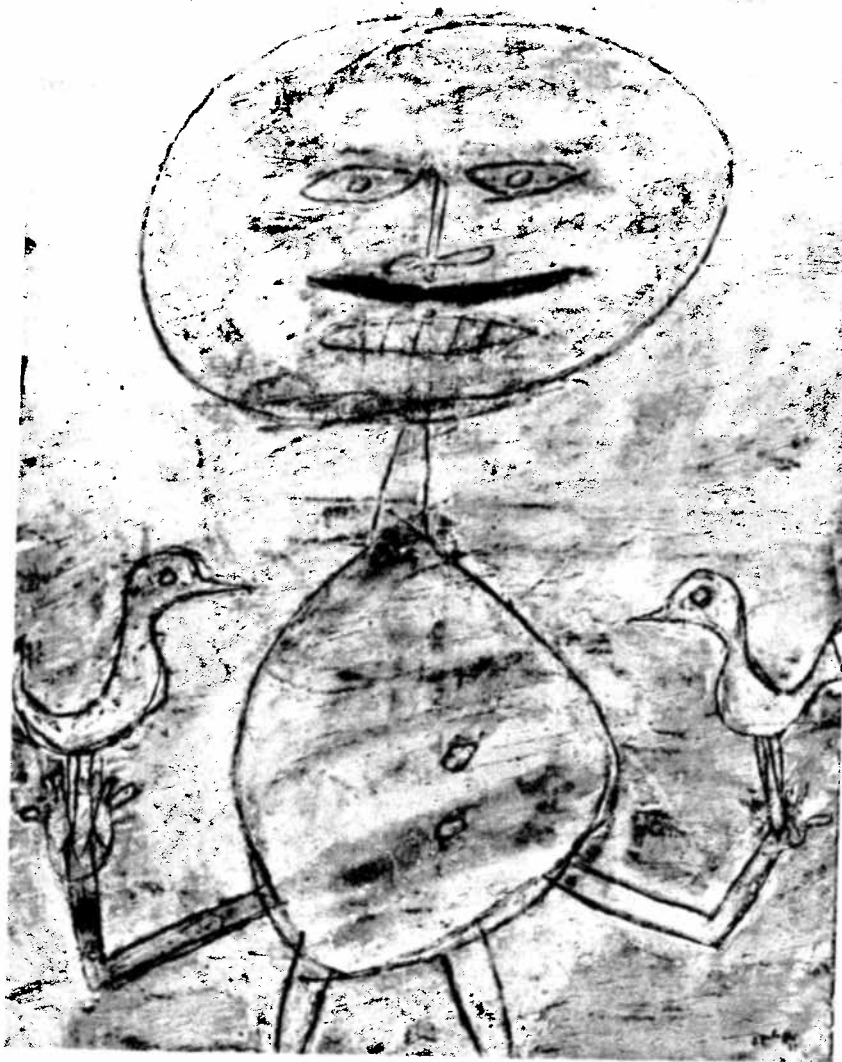
8  
*Portrait de Lili (Lili blanc, roux et lilas)*  
September 1946  
Oil and sand on canvas  
33 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

9  
*Jean Paulhan diable noir*  
July-August 1947  
Lime, plaster and cement on masonite  
43" x 34 $\frac{5}{8}$ "  
Private collection, New York

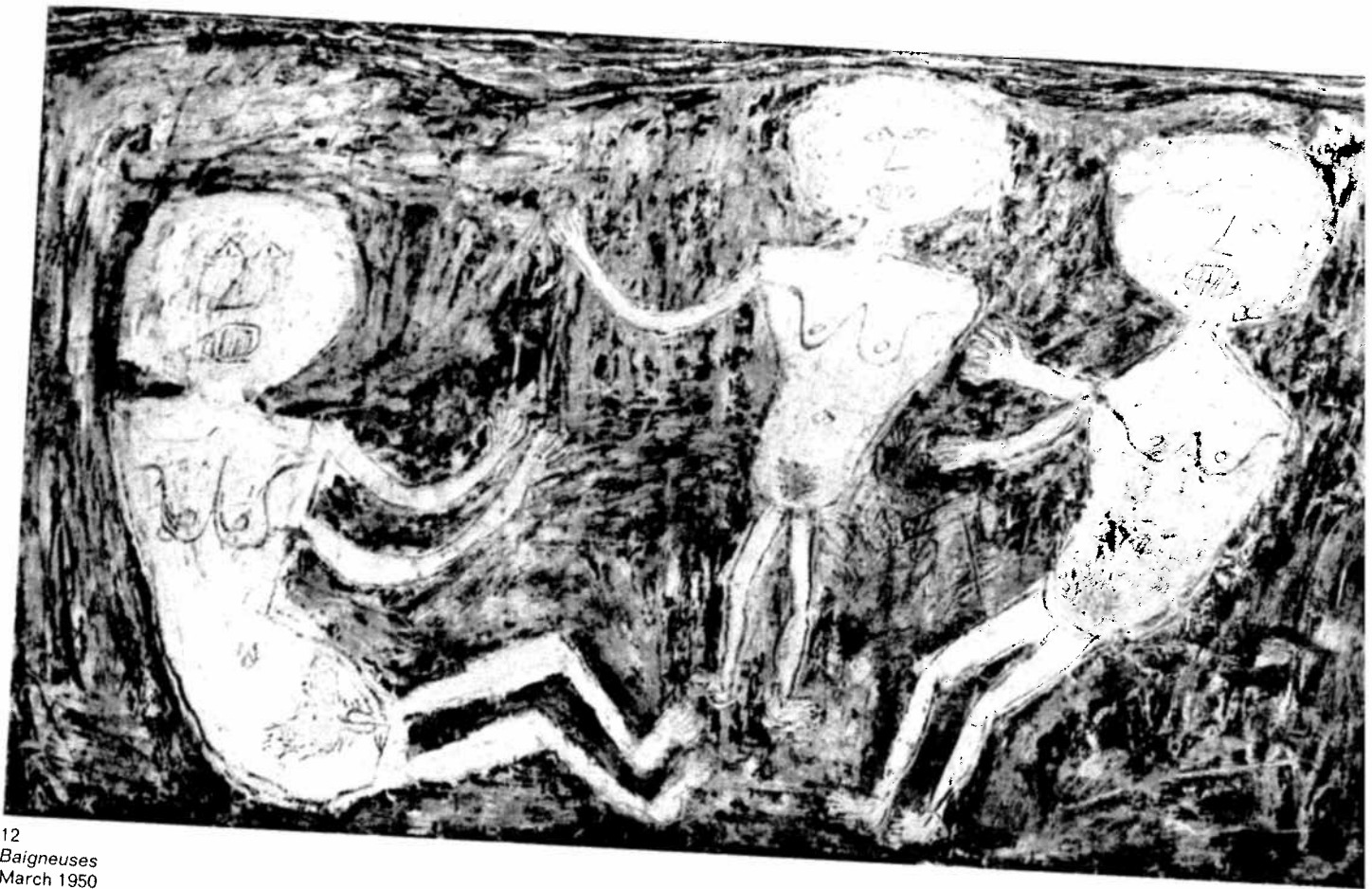




10  
*Arabe au fusil*  
May-June 1948  
Oil on canvas  
36 1/4" x 28 3/4"



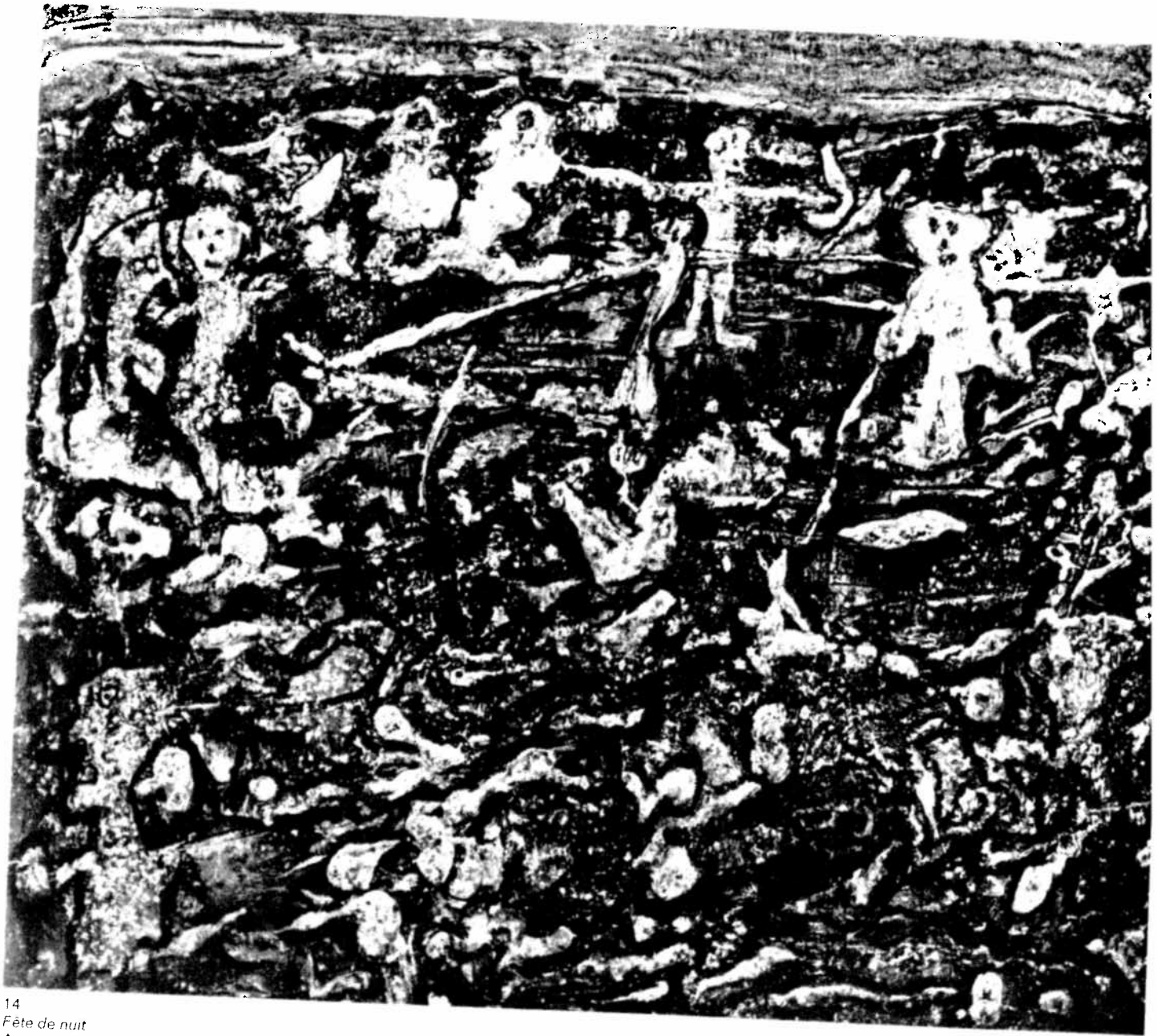
11  
*L'Oiseleur*  
May 1949  
Oil and paste on canvas  
45 $\frac{7}{8}$ " x 34 $\frac{7}{8}$ "



12  
*Baigneuses*  
March 1950  
Oil on canvas  
45" x 77"

13  
*L'Effrayé*  
February 5, 1951  
Oil on canvas  
36" x 28<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>"  
Collection Mr. Gordon F.  
Hampton, San Marino





14

*Fête de nuit*

August 1951

Oil on board

21  $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 25  $\frac{5}{8}$ "

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bernstein, New Orleans

15

*Table de forme indéfinie*  
August 1951  
Oil and paste on board  
28 3/4" x 36 1/4"



17  
*Personnage en ailes de papillons*  
October 1953  
Butterfly wings and gouache on cardboard  
9 3/4" x 7 1/4"  
Collection Dr. and Mrs. E. Arnold Jones, New York

16  
*Paysage métapsychique*  
December 1952  
Oil on canvas  
51 1/4" x 64"  
Private collection, New York



