

Jean Dubuffet & Art Brut: The Creation of an Avant-Garde Identity

By Antonia Dapena-Tretter

Abstract

Since Jean Dubuffet first invented the category Art Brut, or Outsider Art, has stood as a unique niche characterized by supposedly pure or authentic artworks born outside the clutches of cultural influence. Despite staking claim to the Art Brut label himself, Dubuffet maintained a profitable career within the fine art market he criticized, utilizing his unusual collection as a tool through which to fashion an image of individuality. As the avant-garde artist par excellence, Dubuffet's early career reveals a personal quest for an undetected 'other'—resolved through his 1945 'discovery' of Art Brut. In writing *Asphyxiating Culture* and other public texts that denounce societal impact on artistic production, Dubuffet carefully constructed the appearance of an outsider. While reaping the financial benefits of an avant-garde status, Dubuffet simultaneously shamed other artists within his Art Brut collection for pursuing artistic recognition or fame. This article provides a careful reading of Dubuffet's many texts and artist statements, underscoring the paradoxical nature of his celebrated career and ultimately questioning the very idea of artistic authenticity.

Struck by the freedom of expression found in the recently-discovered art of the mentally-ill, the French post-war artist Jean Dubuffet began a quest for what he called art of 'raw' origins—an indirect reference to Levi Strauss's famous volume *The Raw and the Cooked*. His search was resolved in 1945 when the artist claimed to have discovered a new category of art. Known more generally today by the English equivalent, Outsider Art, Art Brut stands as a unique art niche characterized by supposedly authentic art objects created outside of the cultural influence of an academic art tradition. Now housed in Lausanne, Switzerland, Dubuffet's *Collection de l'art brut* contains thousands of art objects once

considered by their late collector to be worthy of the unusual 'brut' designation. If for no other reason than the fact that he maintained a profitable career within the commercial art market he criticized, the collector's reputation differed dramatically from that of the Art Brut artists he championed. To compensate for the obvious differences between his career and that of an authentic Art Brut artist, Dubuffet's outsider identity had to be constantly forged through his controversial art production and prolific writings. In penning *Asphyxiating Culture* and other widely available texts that denounce any societal impact on artistic production, Dubuffet shaped his identity as an outsider and in turn reaped the benefits of the avant-garde status he had constructed for himself.

The following analysis seeks to question Dubuffet's authenticity through a detailed review of his relationship to Art Brut—from its mid-century invention to the art world's acceptance of Dubuffet as a member of the avant-garde. The first section aims specifically to contextualize Art Brut and the unique power dynamics that inherently exist between collector and artist. The second assesses Dubuffet's supposed position as an outsider and the long-accepted literature that advances this viewpoint without sufficient research. Through a specific examination of the artist's own words, the paradoxical nature of his career is revealed, and the artist is ultimately exposed as a member of the same 'culture club' he famously denounced.

Dubuffet and the Search for Authenticity in Art Brut

Dubuffet was born in 1901 to a middle-class family in Le Havre, France. At the age of eighteen, despite pressure from his father to study business, he entered the Académie Julian. He tired of academic training after only six months (Selz 9).

It was not until he turned forty-three that he managed to secure gallery representation. Dubuffet referred to the twenty-something years after leaving the Académie as his 'prehistory', and while he destroyed most of his early works, a handful of paintings do remain (Rhodes 779). Scrutinizing these pre-1940s tableaux, art historian Aruna D'Souza categorizes this period as 'Picasso-esque', composed mostly of artworks belonging to a 'classical-Cubist mode' (D'Souza 65). Perhaps it was because his work seemed derivative of what was already on the market that Dubuffet failed to actualize his career until he was middle-aged. To differentiate his art from the rest, he would need to look beyond the Parisian art bubble—a precedent set by a number of avant-garde artists. Drawing parallels between Dubuffet's search and similar quests for non-Western inspiration, outsider art expert Lucienne Peiry noted:

Artists felt a need to free themselves from their tradition and were searching for new values and landmarks, resulting in a kaleidoscopic quest for otherness: Delacroix left for the East in search of love with the splendor of the South Seas, Picasso was fascinated by strange tribal works, and Kandinsky marveled at the engravings of folk artists (13).

Perhaps originality seemed more accessible away from home, beyond the cultural forces of familiar surroundings. This would explain the marked predilection of avant-gardism for all variations of the 'primitive', in literature as well as in the visual arts. So-called primitive people were thought to possess a 'spontaneity' that Western civilization was believed to have lost (Bergel 116). Favoured non-Western cultures of the avant-garde were typically non-industrial and were therefore interpreted as being somehow closer to nature. Lumped together with their

natural surroundings, they were thought to exhibit uninhibited behaviour, charming in its simplicity.



Fig. 1: Jean Dubuffet, *Four Bedouins with an Overloaded Camel*, 1948. The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. ©2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

In search of a creative awakening like his artistic predecessors, Dubuffet made a series of trips to the French colony of Algeria between 1947 and 1949 (Minturn 248). He took with him pencils and paper to pass out to willing natives in hopes of observing their art-making habits. Works created by Dubuffet either in Algeria, or from memory shortly thereafter, include a number of gouaches and oil paintings, for example *Four Arabs with an Overloaded Camel* (**Figure 1**). Initially, the exotic destination provided an artistic impetus, but by the third trip, Algeria no longer seemed any more liberated than France. Apparently, the appeal proved attractive in concept only, and Dubuffet began to refer to the indigenous peoples of the Sahara as ‘clowns of the desert’. In 1949 he officially declared: ‘I have

for the moment renounced the descriptive arts of exoticisms' (Minturn 253).

By excluding 'exoticisms', the artist had eliminated the possibility of finding inspiration in geographic or ethnic difference. In doing so, Dubuffet purposefully restricted his search for the primitive to the people living in his own Western culture. This new otherness was harder to delineate. It required Dubuffet to coin the term Art Brut and then to define its parameters. This first iteration of the category was very much an umbrella term to describe all sorts of marginal art, including art from asylums, folk art, self-taught masters, drawings by children, tattoos, graffiti, and even cave paintings (Peiry 60). Realizing that the term was a bit vague, Dubuffet wrote in a 1945 letter: 'Naturally, Art Brut is very difficult to define without getting confused ... But there is no reason for saying that something does not exist because it is elusive and indefinable' (qtd. in Peiry 62). The word 'elusive' suggests that the artist meant not only to define Art Brut but to capture it. He would own this slippery category, pinning it more firmly into position with each definition, and by the time Dubuffet arranged his first exhibition of the newly-formed collection, he revealed a noticeably narrowed focus.

The show was held in Paris and contained approximately two thousand works—proof of Dubuffet's intense enthusiasm for Art Brut (Foster 13). In an essay to be published in conjunction with the Art Brut exhibition, Dubuffet offered up the following parameters:

We mean by this the works executed by people untouched by artistic culture, works in which imitation—contrary to what occurs among intellectuals – has little or no part, so that their makers derive everything (subjects, choice of

materials used, means of transportation, rhythms, ways of patterning, etc.) from their own resources and not from the conventions of classic art or the art that happens to be fashionable. Here we find art at its crudest; we see it being wholly reinvented at every stage of the operation by its maker's knack of invention and not, as always in cultural art, from his power of aping others or changing like a chameleon (qtd. in Thévoz 11).

In the above explanation, Dubuffet stressed two things: Art Brut must be created in isolation of societal pressures, including artistic precedent, and it must *not* be derivative. Clearly the chameleon's ability to change its colour is cast in a negative light, and an artist with such an ability would be marked as inauthentic or fraudulent.

With this improved definition, the makers of Art Brut were grouped not so much for what they were, as for what they were not: they were not yet tainted by civilization. While Dubuffet failed to pinpoint the exact difference between his choice of 'other' and the far-off primitiveness generally favoured by the avant-garde, he would later do so in an assortment of promotional materials for a small 1951 showing of his still-growing collection. He now stressed that, unlike other artists traveling abroad in search of the primitive, 'one can on the contrary find authentic and living *European art*' (qtd. in Minturn 262, original emphasis). If the makers of Art Brut were to be located within the European periphery, their otherness was characterized by a less tangible 'psychic elsewhere', an apt descriptor established by art critic Roger Cardinal (95). Intentionally or not, by constructing a category of primitive art without geographic restrictions, Dubuffet had created a type of primitiveness that did not

necessarily exclude his own art. Unlike Picasso's appropriation of African masks—a primitiveness definitively other to his own Western culture—it was difficult to prove that Dubuffet's art did not reflect a 'psychic elsewhere'. Therefore, promoting Art Brut could directly benefit Dubuffet. His audience would most likely associate him with the unprecedented inventiveness of the category in general. However, by exposing Art Brut to the world, he also ran the risk of inadvertently inspiring others to usurp his unique 'other'. Such was the case with gallery owner Alphonse Chave. At the start, Dubuffet considered Chave to be a friend and supporter, but he soon became defensive when the gallery owner showed an interest in an apparently similar endeavour. Dubuffet proclaimed in writing:

[Chave is] in every way a copycat and since I had the idea of putting together an Art Brut collection, he came up with the same idea, an Art Brut collection, but it would be better if he came up with his own ideas and would start collecting pipes or teapots and leave Art Brut alone, seeing as how I'm the one who invented this business and I'm the one who has zealously and methodically worked on it for ten years (qtd. in Peiry 119).

The accusatory tone of the passage indicates that Dubuffet was protective of his collection. When discussing the possibility of being separated from his precious art objects, the artist even described Art Brut as though it were a part of his physical body: 'seeing a few pieces removed is a sacrifice equivalent to losing an eye' (qtd. in Peiry 125). This statement from the artist does more than conflate the collection with the self. Equating Art Brut to his own eye, Dubuffet subconsciously suggested that collecting it had altered his vision – artistic or otherwise.

Studying the frequency with which collectors define themselves through their collections, Pierre Bourdieu, in his book *Rules of Art*, stated that the collector becomes the ‘creator of the creator’, legitimizing the art produced by the discovered artist (Bourdieu 168). In this way, Dubuffet’s role as collector was itself a creative endeavour, but one in which he managed to maintain a constant position of dominance. He was the sole Art Brut inventor and controlled the terms of an artist’s acceptance, their exposure to the public, and all financial negotiations.

Dubuffet’s business training, fostered during his time spent working on the family vineyard, surfaced most obviously in his dealings with outsider artists whose works he admired. In an August 1963 letter, he detailed a recent exchange with artist Clement Fraisse: ‘[Fraisse] first suggested that I offer him a car and garage to put it in, but I found his demands too grandiose and offered to send him fifty thousand francs [five hundred new French francs], with which he was finally satisfied’ (qtd. in Peiry 147). This excerpt, and especially the word ‘finally,’ reveals that Fraisse, left with no other recourse, succumbed to Dubuffet’s request. The work, an elaborately carved wood panel had taken him three years to complete. Other Art Brut artists were given much less, though; Gerard Olive exchanged an artwork for a roll of film, and Raphael Lonné a record player. Claiming to feel remorse for the insufficient monetary compensation he awarded Art Brut creators, Dubuffet wrote, ‘I experience a feeling of injustice in comparing the derisory, or even non-existent, prices that these people receive for their works with the absurd prices for which my own works—which I am aware are not more valuable ... —are sold for commercially’ (qtd. in Peiry 147-48). Here Dubuffet purports that the value of Art Brut should be as much as his own, but he continues to proffer the lowest price

possible. His feelings of injustice read as strangely detached from his actions. As long as Art Brut was excluded from the larger art market, Dubuffet could pay as little as a pack of chewing tobacco for an artwork, the asking price for one Adolf Wölfli. Today, with the benefit of time and exposure, a work by Wölfli will sell at auction for as much as \$100,000—still a pittance when compared to Dubuffet's record of twenty-five million U.S. Dollars, earned for his painting titled *Paris* (sold in April 2015). The shocking disparity can be partially explained by a baseball metaphor:

Folk art is like playing the game of art in a big league ball park, but playing by different rules. As long as the game is played by different rules, the major league players do not mind. They even admire the way which the untrained players can use the same park, even the same diamond, bat, and ball. But there is no competition since beyond these minimal similarities folk art is in a different league, and moreover, it is a very different ball game (Pearse and Webb 27).

While folk art is only one type of Outsider Art, this passage can easily be extended to all of Art Brut. Dubuffet wrote the rules, and his artists had no choice but to play by them.

An unofficial Art Brut credo of sorts (i.e., the rules) can be pieced together based on Dubuffet's various declarations in correspondence with Art Brut creators. This special brand of artist must not crave recognition of any kind; they must be satisfied with whatever small reward they might gain in exchange for their creation. They are to have no concern for whether or not their art will be exhibited or how it might be received by a particular audience. Dubuffet specified: 'one should make art for

oneself in the same way others go fishing or for walks and not to put in a show' (qtd. in Peiry 164). In other words, it should be a recreational activity as opposed to a profession. So, it follows that '[y]ou have to choose between making art and being regarded as an artist. The one excludes the other' (qtd. in Peiry 163). With this claim, Dubuffet excluded any outsider artist who might regard him or herself as an artist sans the outsider prefix. Some of Dubuffet's Art Brut artists adhered to these guidelines, having total disregard for the art object after its completion, but others maintained a more traditional relationship to their artworks, expressing feelings of pride and/or a desire for compensation.



Fig.2: Gaston Chaissac, *Untitled*, c.1948. Photo: Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



Fig.3: Jean Dubuffet, *Cursed Gossip*, 1954. The Museum of Modern Art, New York City. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Gaston Chaissac, an artist, writer, and shoe-repairman whom Dubuffet met during his time in Algeria, is a case in point. Quickly admitted to the Art Brut collection, he would later prove difficult when he began to strive for additional artistic acknowledgement. After becoming aware of similarities between his art and Dubuffet's current projects, Chaissac famously accused Dubuffet of plagiarism. A most convincing comparison (**Figures 2 & 3**) exists between one of Chaissac's untitled charcoal sculptures, still in Dubuffet's Lausanne collection, and Dubuffet's *Cursed Gossip*—carved six years later from the same crude charcoal material—or between Chaissac's 1961 *Totem Double Face* and Dubuffet's 1973 *Personnage pour Washington Parade* (**Figures 4 & 5**).



Fig. 4: Gaston Chaissac, *Totem Double Face*, 1961. Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / image Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.



Fig. 5: Jean Dubuffet, *Personnage pour Washington Parade*, 1973-2008, Edition 5 of 7. No. 46497.05, Photograph courtesy Pace Gallery. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Totem Double Face demonstrates Chaissac's propensity to divide his figures into smaller puzzle-piece-like sections. While two-dimensional, the work stands as tall as a person and is generally considered to be a sculpture. *Personnage pour Washington Parade*—a similarly flat figure composed of linked, irregular shapes—could represent any number of Dubuffet's *l'hourloupe* sculptures from the early 1970s. The *l'hourloupe* style first manifested itself in Dubuffet's portfolio in 1962, shortly after Chaissac began experimenting with *his* signature technique. Art historian Sarah Wilson sees Chaissac's claims as 'not unjustified' (Tuchman 132). As though remembering the criticism that his early art too closely resembled Picasso's, Dubuffet renounced any formal influences beyond a psychological inspiration. He stated with no uncertainty: 'I have never been influenced by Art Brut. I have been influenced by their freedom, a freedom which has helped me a great deal' (qtd. in Peiry 100).

In spite of Dubuffet's assertions, Chaissac's accusations had the potential to be incredibly dangerous to his career. Gary Alan Fine, in his article 'Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art', maintains that '[i]f authenticity sells art, claims of inauthenticity can be damaging' (166). The question of authenticity is especially important when traditional measures, such as draftsmanship, are dismantled. This became particularly true in the twentieth century with the development of abstraction. Paintings or sculptures were suddenly judged by a different rubric, and their appreciation was considerably more dependent on artistic intent than merit. It is for this reason that possible claims of disingenuous inspiration could have been detrimental to Dubuffet's reputation. Interestingly, the artist *did* recognize the risk of inadvertently copying another artist's

style, and his words, taken from *In Honour of Savage Values*, could actually support Chaissac's case:

The author is not conscious that he imitates another work of art, which strongly impressed him and which he assimilated. He believes, entirely in good faith, that he pulled it out of his own reserves (qtd. in Minturn 261).

Had Dubuffet found inspiration for *Cursed Gossip* and *Personnage pour Washington Parade* subconsciously through his frequent exposure to Chaissac's art? It is entirely possible, but most art critics remain wary of the search for direct points of influence, as they are by nature impossible to prove. As a consequence, the various formal similarities between the works of Dubuffet and his many outsider artists are generally dismissed or ignored (Bowler 23). After the plagiarism accusation, Dubuffet removed Chaissac from the Art Brut collection. It was at this time that he began an annex grouping, the New Invention Collection, for Chaissac's works and other pieces created by outsider artists who displayed a desire for fame and other insider ambitions (Peiry 213). While their art technically remained in Dubuffet's collection, the New Invention sub-collection was a certain demotion, as these artists were no longer recognized for their unadulterated originality, and the relocation was a stern reminder that the collector's support was not to be taken for granted.

Dubuffet as Inauthentic Outsider

Shamelessly promoting his own work, Dubuffet would not have qualified for either the New Invention or Art Brut categories. Because he did not hold himself to the same standards as the artists he collected, it was not uncommon for him to make bold declarations such as, 'Away with all those stale canvases hanging

in dreary museums like the wives of Bluebeard's cabinet! They *were* paintings; they no longer *are*' (qtd. in Rhodes 779). Here the artist worked to build his reputation as an artistic innovator. He called attention to his new, crude painting style as something altogether unique, and went so far as to claim that his technique made all previous art obsolete. Commenting on the public's reception of these artworks, one contemporary critic observed: '[Viewers] were revolted by his use of mud, his "scrapings of the dust bin"...[and]... the 1946 show was sold out within days' (qtd. in Selz 22). The popularity of this exhibit proved the marketability of shock value, and it was through it that American art critic Clement Greenberg first noticed Dubuffet. With Greenberg's promotion, the artist's reputation as an outsider was cemented internationally and remained intact for decades.

Even recent scholarship continues to support Dubuffet's claim to the outsider image. For example, Peiry wrote in her 2006 published dissertation:

The inventor of Art Brut is an atypical artist, a traitor to his profession, an intellectual keen on a lack of cultivation, a professor of the inconsequential, a double agent, an ingenious smuggler operating along the borders of culture (8).

By calling the artist a double agent, she suggested that the *real* mask donned by Dubuffet was that of the insider. She has not questioned the authenticity of his outsider status, attempting instead to rationalize the inconsistencies. Michel Thevoz, curator of the Art Brut collection from 1976 to 2001, took a similar stance: 'Dubuffet must be defined in strategic terms as an *enemy from within*, using the cultural instruments and institutions at his disposal to wage war on culture' (50). Was he an authentic outsider, somehow able to parade undetected on the inside? Both

Peiry and Thevoz were willing to overlook blatant hypocrisy and professional contradictions to give Dubuffet the benefit of the doubt; however, this blanketed acceptance of Dubuffet's artistic authenticity is becoming less common in the field.

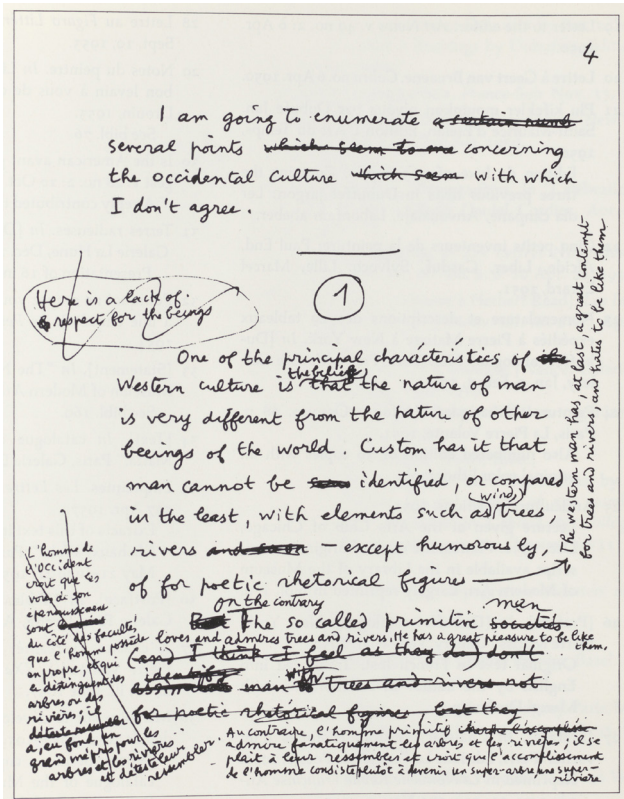


Fig. 6: Jean Dubuffet, Notes from a speech the artist gave at the Arts Club of Chicago, Dec. 1951. Museum of Modern Art Library, New York City. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

The performance scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who focuses on issues of performance and identity, indicates that authenticity stems from 'an absence of cognitive

understanding—sincere, innocent, original, genuine, and unaffected, distinct from strategic and pragmatic self-presentation’ (155). Put simply, authenticity is what a person presents through his or her unmediated action. The more self-censorship, the more controlled the presentation, the less authentic the act. Looking for signs of self-censorship in Dubuffet’s career, one is quick to uncover multiple instances of inauthenticity. One example comes from a rare opportunity to view the artist’s handwritten notes for his 1951 lecture at the Arts Club of Chicago. Dubuffet covered a piece of paper with his unmediated thoughts, scratching and scribbling on all sides of the sheet (**Figure 6**). There he sketched out his oft-quoted binary between Western man and the so-called ‘primitive’:

The Western man has at least a great contempt for trees and rivers, and hates to be like them. On the contrary, the so-called primitive man loves and admires trees and rivers. He has a great pleasure to be like them. And I think I feel as they do (qtd. in Selz 173).

The last sentence, ‘And I think I feel as they do’, has been crossed-out by the artist. Did Dubuffet think it would come across as somehow too radical? While we will never know the reason, we can see that the artist was aware that he had an audience and clearly reconsidered the image he might project by making such a statement. All his omissions and edits expose a heightened sense of self-awareness. So, what is ultimately shown through this redacted text is a level of self-consciousness counter to the authentic experience as defined by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

His artist statements would likewise have been censored, and reading with this fresh critical eye enables us to uncover numerous contradictions. In *Asphyxiating Culture*, as the title

suggests, Dubuffet described a desire to suffocate culture with a capital 'C'. Its monstrous forces contained within its power the influence of commercialization and intellectualism, both of which Dubuffet scorned. Apart from noticeable Marxist undertones, *Asphyxiating Culture* is otherwise vague, with the last line reeking of a purposeful generality: 'The important thing is to be *against*' (Dubuffet 93). This is a clever manoeuvre on the part of the artist, for he has managed to attack culture but does so in such a general way that he avoids making political arguments or listing any specifics. *Asphyxiating Culture* is a rant designed so that no one is actually offended, a calculated attempt to increase the market value of his art through the furthering of his outsider identity while remaining entirely neutral. Still relatively noncommittal, one passage meant to champion the common man by knocking intellectualism unintentionally exposes Dubuffet's guarded insider status:

Thus an intellectual can receive immense success for having presented a certain object to the enchanted cultural body—a urinal, a bottle rack—that all plumbers and cellar-men have been admiring for fifty years. But it never occurs to anyone that the plumber and cellar-man played the role of discoverers (Dubuffet 45).

Speaking out for the plumber and cellar-man might have seemed transgressive in certain cultural circles, but Dubuffet makes clear reference to two of Marcel Duchamp's readymade artworks—*Bottle Rack* and *Fountain*—thereby situating himself in connection with the ever-evolving art scene and its corresponding intellectualism. Was he actually angry for the overlooked plumber? It seems more likely that he was jealous of Duchamp, another Frenchman, who was getting recognition for

his shocking art. The true cellar-man would have been unaware of Duchamp's Dada urinal—shielded from the cultural splash by his lack of contact with the art world. Dubuffet's cognizance of this important art historical development, on the other hand, puts him squarely in the position of an insider.

Recognizing these textual fissures disassembles the artist's carefully constructed image and allows for a better understanding of how Dubuffet should be situated in relation to the true outsider artist. A particularly baffling textual disconnect is unearthed after cross-referencing various artist statements against Dubuffet's visual, rather than textual, portfolio. In 1953, the artist finished *Butterfly-Wing Figure* (**Figure 7**), his first collage made by pasting butterfly wings to a backing board. Additional colour was then added to the background with watercolour. Obviously pleased with the outcome, Dubuffet completed a handful of other butterfly-wing works between 1953 and 1955, including *Sylvain* and *The Garden of Bibi Trompette*. In his memoir, he described the particular joy of catching butterflies as stemming from '[t]he liveliness of the chase itself, the exhilarating effect of the hot sunshine of this country, new to me at that time, and the charm of the mountain solitudes where I chased butterflies' (qtd. in Selz 109).¹

The senseless killing of colourful, winged insects is only one small part of the story, and art historian Sarah K. Rich dissects the many layers behind their execution in her article, 'Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man'. As Dubuffet reported, he

¹ In 1968 when Dubuffet published *Asphyxiating Culture*, he included one strikingly contradictory metaphor in which the butterfly catcher was specifically grouped within the category of culture with a capital 'C'. He wrote: 'The culture club, in its eagerness to heavy-handedly name and endorse, fills a function comparable to that of the butterfly catcher. Culture cannot stand butterflies that fly' (Dubuffet 46). While this statement is surely a metaphor for society's ability to crush beauty and freedom, by casting himself as the butterfly catcher, had Dubuffet revealed himself as a true member of the 'Culture Club'?



Fig.7: Jean Dubuffet, *Butterfly-Wing Figure*, 1953. Photo: Cathy Carver. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1991. © 2017 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

was in Switzerland when he first caught butterflies, but what he neglected to include in his account of the chase was that he was *not* alone. Although Dubuffet had planned to draw, he was inspired by his artist companion Pierre Bettencourt who was busy constructing butterfly-wing collages. In a letter following their art-making sessions, Bettencourt proposed a joint exhibition where they could display the fruits of their labours side by side. Declining to participate, Dubuffet wrote back: 'I have been your imitator through this whole affair, and that makes me anxious...' (qtd. in Rich 54). However, within the next few months, Dubuffet's butterfly artworks were included in the 'Démon et merveilles' exhibition with no mention of Bettencourt. Infuriated, Bettencourt organized his own exhibit with promotional materials, publicly stating that Dubuffet had plagiarized his idea. Disregarding Bettencourt's evidence to the contrary, Dubuffet again denied any influence: 'I do not have the slightest awareness of any borrowing from my work ...' (qtd. in Rich 55).

Putting a spin on a story that would otherwise read as being very much like Chaissac's accusations, the letters between Bettencourt and Dubuffet also revealed a mutual respect for the insect's mimicry of other animals—likely a defensive mechanism—and its remarkable ability to transform itself during metamorphosis. Quite the opposite of his outward repulsion for the chameleon, Dubuffet privately appreciated these qualities in butterflies, and his compositional choices highlight that fact. When composing his collages, he often hid the more colourful side of the insect's wings to expose the creature's eyelike spots or ocelli (Rich 70). In *Butterfly-Wing Figure*, the imitative ocelli are precisely arranged to form a series of buttons running down the chest of the man. Mimicry is given a place of honour, front and

centre.

After reviewing cases like Bettencourt's or Chaissac's, the attempt to create a category just for Dubuffet—that of an outsider on the insider—seems absurd. Comparing his career to that of a true Art Brut artist exposes a fabrication of originality, riddled with imitation, and structured solidly around his collection and any associations that might be made between the two. If Art Brut artists spoke out, recognizing their integral role in Dubuffet's grand performance, like Chaissac, they would be pushed offstage before Dubuffet's avant-garde persona could be questioned. Behind the smoke and mirrors of his cultural lambasting—whether through his writing, collecting, or art-making—there was always an insider in full costume. Dubuffet managed to secure a coveted spot within the art historical canon, reserved for a select few, but, given his inability to start a career before his discovery of Art Brut, it seems safe to say that it could not have been done without the assistance of his Art Brut artists, the cellar-man, and the plumber.

Works Cited

- Bergel, Lienhard. 'The Avant-Garde Mind and Its Expression.' *Comparative Literature Studies*. Special Advance Number (1963): 115-125.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Cardinal, Roger. 'Surrealism and the Paradigm of the Creative Subject.' *Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art*. Ed. by Maurice Tuchman and Carol S. Eliel. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1992. 94-119.
- D'Souza, Aruna. 'I Think Your Work Looks a Lot Like Dubuffet': Dubuffet and America, 1946-1962. *Oxford Art*

Journal 20.2 (1997): 61-73.

Dubuffet, Jean. *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1988.

Dubuffet, Jean, and Kent Minturn. 'In Honor of Savage Values.' *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*. 46 (2004): 259-268.

Fine, Gary Alan. 'Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art.' *Theory and Society* 32.2 (2003): 153-180.

Foster, Hal. 'Blinded Insights: On the Modernist Reception of the Art of the Mentally Ill.' *October* 97 (2001): 3-30.

Minturn, Kent. 'Dubuffet, Lévi-Strauss, and the Idea of Art Brut.' *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*. 46 (2004): 247-258.

Pearse, Harold, and Nick Webb. 'Borderline Cases: A Philosophical Approach to Child and Folk Art.' *Art Education* 37.4 (1984): 20-27.

Peiry, Lucienne. *Art Brut : The Origins of Outsider Art..2nd English language ed.* Paris: Flammarion, 2006.

Rhodes, Colin. 'Jean Dubuffet. Paris.' *The Burlington Magazine* 143.1185 (2001): 779-781.

Rich, Sarah K. 'Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man.' *October* 119 (2007): 46-74.

Selz, Peter Howard. *The Work of Jean Dubuffet: With Texts by the Artist*. Eds. Jean Dubuffet, et al. Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y., 1962.

Thévoz, Michel. *L'Art Brut*. Geneva: Skira, 1975.

Tuchman, Maurice. *Parallel Visions : Modern Artists and Outsider Art*. Eds. Carol S. Eliel and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.