

Dubuffet, current developments—in *trompe-l'œil*

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- 1 The commemorative signs of the centenary of Jean Dubuffet's birth are somewhat surprising. An impressive and eagerly awaited retrospective was put on at the Georges Pompidou Centre, an event whose scope was the dominant point of a series of exhibitions held, in particular, in the city of Le Havre, where Dubuffet was born, and at the Dubuffet Foundation. It would nevertheless seem that the current state of museography is in contrast with publishing production, hallmarked, for its part, by a raft of new editions, be these writings by Dubuffet or by some of his loyal commentators. First and foremost, let's take a look at the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Daniel Abadie at the National Museum of Modern Art. The choice of essays is based on the one hand on a chronological route, and on the other on a route bound up with the painter's personality. For example, Thomas M. Messer reckons that it is a good idea to deal with the period of artistic initiation—made up of portraits, landscapes, still lifes and subjects described altogether

mysteriously as “quasi-historical”—on an equal footing with the other periods, whereas Giulio-Carlo Argan champions the idea of a cynical Dubuffet, at once anti-Pythagorean and pataphysical, adopting the standpoint of an anthropologist. Argan’s approach can be better grasped in the context of 1968, when the text was first published. It actually transpires that in the catalogue, eight contributions out of seventeen are republications of writings that are often still available, raising the issue of the awkward balance between old approaches and new analyses. Among these latter, Henri Meschonnic’s contribution stands out for the wholesome critical distance he decrees for himself, as he challenges Dubuffet’s contradictions to do with the conflict between art and culture, the classical and Art Brut, “the radical historicity of the work” and “the refusal of the Céline problem”. Also worth noting is Lorenza Trucchi’s attempt to include Dubuffet within an artistic history by likening him to Bacon and Giacometti: all three supposedly in pursuit of “the quest for truth, on their own”. But the radical contrast introduced between a “thirst for truth”, almost always leading to scandal, and a “thirst for knowledge”, leading to wisdom, probably requires some subtle qualification. Dubuffet’s relationship to knowledge is primordial in both his artistic and literary praxis. For all this, the writing issue seems to be dodged, as do the issues to do with the works on paper, the sculptures, and Dubuffet’s links with architecture. These articles apart, we find at the end of the catalogue a biography and, more importantly, a bibliography featuring press articles almost to the exclusion of all else. These latter, some of which are simply referenced and summed up, don’t offer the reader the pleasure of reading the articles of the day—not even in excerpt form. What’s more, these articles are arranged in alphabetical order and not chronologically, which would have made it possible to see Dubuffet’s critical acclaim unfold. It may be a pity, last of all, that the bibliography ceases at the artist’s death, as if nothing had been written since.

- 2 The other publications devoted to Dubuffet are the outcome of a wide-circulation publishing policy, aimed at making Dubuffet’s work accessible to the general public. Democratization, popularization, buoyant market, all three are facets of a new phenomenon. It is now actually possible to put your hands on a *Dubuffet* volume in the “Découvrons l’art-XXe siècle” collection put out by Editions Cercle d’art, and as a special issue in the Gallimard “Découvertes” collection. The only period dealt with in this slim little book are the *L’Hourloupe* years (1962-1974). Published jointly by the Georges Pompidou Centre, the playful structure offered by the foldout pages nevertheless leaves the reader eager for more. The same goes for the Cercle d’art publication—the text is very second fiddle in relation to the reproductions of the works. As far as Laurent Danchin’s work, published by Terrail, is concerned, this is a revival of *Jean Dubuffet. Peintre-philosophe*, published in 1988 and just re-published under the same title, but here fleshed out with more than 140 colour illustrations. Has Dubuffet, the anti-cultural rebel, finally become a 20th century classic? In this category of picture-book, whatever the answer may be, Lucienne Peiry’s work, *Art Brut. The Origins of Outsider Art*, fills a slot all of its own on account of its genuine concern to offer the general public access to a university thesis titled: *De la clandestinité à la consécration. Histoire de la collection de l’Art Brut, 1945-1996*. But here again, this is an older text already published in French by Flammarion in 1997.
- 3 It now remains for us to analyse a third aspect of the republication phenomenon—the shift from one medium to another. A CD-Rom titled *Jean Dubuffet, le spectacle de la vie* offers a comprehensive wealth of illustrative material covering 600 works arranged in broad themes or in chronological order, with a short technical notice accompanying each one,

and a voice-over reading Dubuffet writings, plus excerpts from films and disks recorded by the artist. The biographical section, focusing on the writing, music and collection of Art Brut and *Coucou Bazar* is quite concise and to the point, and the index of works is cleverly worked out, helping the user to make searches either alphabetically, by date, or by keyword. This CD-Rom is a stimulating introduction to Dubuffet's work, even if it involves giving (new) shape to older knowledge, and above all to the artist's own words, written and spoken—and in particular to a piece written at the end of his life called *Biographie au pas de course*. Contrary to what the title might suggest (“biography at the run”), this piece is altogether autobiographical. It has, moreover, been republished with some 40 archival documents in the fine “Les Cahiers” collection put out by the NRF. Published for the exhibition *Jean Dubuffet, une biographie au pas de course*, held at the Dubuffet Foundation, this text ushers in a new attentiveness being afforded Dubuffet's writings, and harbingers other projects, such as the publication of all the painter's hitherto unpublished letters written to Jean Paulhan. In this same spirit, the publication of the correspondence between Dubuffet and the Catalan writer Ludovic Massé, between 1940 and 1981, by Mare Nostrum, an as yet relatively unknown publishing house, is a welcome addition to the literature.

- 4 By way of conclusion, it is worth wondering to what extent this current *trompe l'œil* publishing development, with its new editions, republications, works aimed at the general public, and CD-Roms, will drum up a wave of keen interest in Dubuffet's work and give rise to a new “critical freedom”. The time seems ripe to shake off the tremendous discourse about Dubuffet and take a look at his work from an historical standpoint.