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Part 1: Projections

2. Metromania or the Undersides of Painting

Sophie Berrebi

Overhead driveways and their sprawling, spaghetti-like networks have come to exemplify in the collective visual imagination the archetypal motif of late capitalist urban dystopia. The underground railway system, by contrast, speaks of an earlier modernity, one that was born in the industrial age, and developed in the early-twentieth century, producing in that course the now classic dialectic of alienation and progress analyzed by Georg Simmel (1998).

Stepping down into the Parisian metro in the mid-1940s to paint its commuters, the French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) seemingly avoided those themes. Neither was he much concerned, in the sinister years of the Occupation, with any veiled allusion to the underground resistance movements that occasionally used the metro as a site of action. The straight-faced multicolored puppets that appeared in a large painting (*Le Metro*, 1943) and in a series of equally colorful gouaches (1943) were made in the early years of this third and successful attempt to embark on a career as a visual artist. The recurrence of the subject matter in Dubuffet's oeuvre – a series of lithographs on the metro followed in 1949 – bestows it a programmatic quality for the work that followed. Bypassing the more expected associations with modernity, the metro provided the artist with a mundane set filled with everyday characters that suited the artist's claim to avoid high culture and classical beauty and depict instead the 'common man' in his daily routines. If it were only a vehicle to convey this idea of the common man, the underground, in its incarnation of the Paris metro, would be little more than an accidental support to this idea. Yet underground as an idea recurs in Dubuffet's pictorial and verbal work after this initial period, and extends well beyond the subject matter of the metro. His interest in the ground, the soil, the undergrowth as a subject matter in the 1950s reprises this notion as a visual theme. Furthermore, 'underground', can also be used to describe the 'Art Brut' toward which he displayed a sustained interest as a collector and main theorist, after coining the word in the mid-1940s. Likewise, his celebrations of 'anticulture' – in opposition to established high culture – in particular in a lecture given in English in Chicago in 1951 to an audience of American art amateurs, institutional figures, and artists, may be understood as another oblique reference to an idea of a cultural underground.

Thus if the idea proposed by this book is to explore a certain polysemic understanding of the underground as place and idea associated with the urban my-



2.1. Jean Dubuffet. *Métro*, oil on canvas (1943).



2.2. Jean Dubuffet. *Métro*, gouache on paper (1943).

thologies and histories of Amsterdam and Paris, the term also aptly characterizes a recurring set of interests, issues, and themes that Dubuffet developed throughout his extended career. Within his oeuvre the underground, we might say, is both a place and a metaphor, and relates to both apocryphal and factual aspects of his life, work, and ideas. As such the term ‘underground’ sums up and resonates deeply yet diffusely with his multi-faceted practice. It can be used to define a set of thematic issues as well as technical concerns, and above all, perhaps, it suggests a way of thinking.

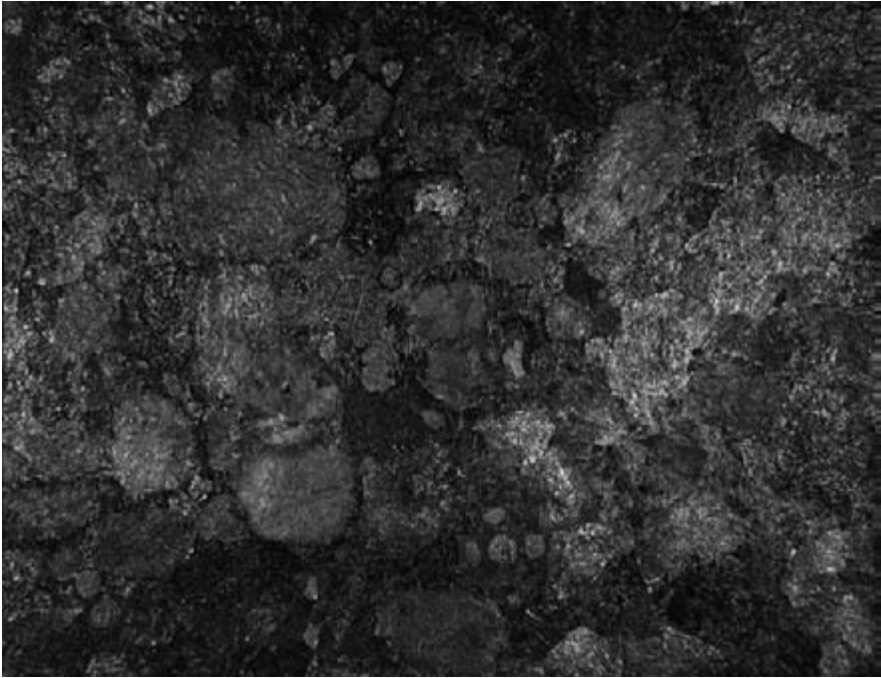
The aim of this essay is to examine the term underground as a key to unlock and define Dubuffet’s aesthetic and, if not to iron out the many paradoxes that characterize it, at least to identify some kind of convergence in the wide constellation of his concerns as painter, writer, and collector.

Within Dubuffet’s oeuvre, which spans six decades from the early and largely fruitless attempts at becoming an artist in the 1920s and 1930s to his death in 1985 after a prolific career, the depictions of the Paris underground from the 1940s constitute only the first evocation of the underground understood literally as an underground network. Soon after, moving away from the urban context, Dubuffet undertakes a series of paintings that evoke more or less abstractly the soil and what exists underneath the ground. This concern recurs in different works that suggest topographic explorations of a given area or, on the contrary, vertical cuts into the ground. In several instances, the term ‘underground’ appears in titles that use the French equivalent of the term: ‘*sous-sol*’. *L’âme des sous-sols* (*The Soul of the Underground*) from 1959 exemplifies this interest. The painting suggests – more than it actually depicts – a formless and undefined area of earth under the ground. In such a work, another idea of underground emerges, as the term might be said to refer not only to the subject matter but also to the radical technical approach to painting that is developed by the artist, who spreads and piles up thickly onto the canvas heavy, muddy substances that make the final work oscillate between the two dimensions of painting and the three dimensions of relief, or sculpture.

A sentence by art theorist and historian Hubert Damisch, one of Dubuffet’s most subtle exegetes, establishes, suggestively but briefly, a connection between these two very different ideas of what the ‘underground’ may signify as subject matter and technique. Writing in 1962 what is, in part, a phenomenological critique of Dubuffet, Damisch remarked,

If Dubuffet does not enjoy working with flat brushstrokes, that is because the observer of the ‘*dessous de la capitale*’ (the undersides of Paris) and the geologist that he later became, likes to work within the thickness of the ground – I mean the painting – and to disclose its undersides. (*Fenêtre* 114, author’s translation)

Although Damisch does not develop this direct connection any further in his essay, it also appears in the very title of the book in which this text was reprinted, *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture*. The title of this book, which contains a series of monographic essays on twentieth-century artists, is



23. Jean Dubuffet. *L'âme des sous-sols*, silver-paper (1959).

remarkably close to the title of the book compiled by Jean Dubuffet and Jean Paulhan in 1949: *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*. The heading of my own paper brings together the titles of these two publications in order to take up Damisch's brief – but highly significant – allusion and delve further into questioning the relationship between the *undersides* of Paris and those of painting.

More specifically, my aim is to examine how the idea of underground, in all its semantic variety, can be construed as a term to define Dubuffet's practice. In turn this will shed light on how Dubuffet's work, through its continuous involvement with different kinds of underground, contributes to the definition of this term somewhat more generally in the framework of cultural production in the post-war period.

The 1940s, and in particular what I call the 'metro years' from 1943 to 1949, is a key period to look at in this context. It brackets a period of a few years during which Dubuffet raises in provocative ways the question of the human figure, of the painters' technique and materials, and of culture and its dissidences. How these different streams of interests coalesced in defining a particular form of 'underground thinking', or 'thinking of the underground' – as Andrew Hussey evokes in his chapter – that profoundly orientated and defined his practice of the following decade is what I want to investigate.

The Underneath of Paris

The metro paintings and gouaches from 1943-1945 were created in the midst of Dubuffet's series the *Marionnettes de la ville et de la campagne*. The *Marionnettes* were the artist's earliest public statement and consisted of paintings, gouaches, and drawings depicting urban scenes with Parisian buildings and their inhabitants, and country landscapes complete with animals and farmers. Formally, the paintings combined flattened perspective, bright, at time unmixed colors, with coarsely outlined and schematically drawn figures. They exude a general effect that might be described as one of conscious, playful, and elaborate 'de-skilling' by which Dubuffet deliberately went against the subtle color harmonies of an Henri Matisse, and the artful and precise distortions of a Pablo Picasso, to compare him to two veteran modernists who were celebrated by important exhibitions in Paris at the end of the war, at the time Dubuffet encountered his first successes on the Paris art scene. Dubuffet followed up this theme of the metro with a series of gouaches that reprise the characteristics of the large metro painting from 1943, on a smaller scale and in ten scenes. Dubuffet hoped to assemble these scenes into a book but the project, which lingered in the publisher's offices, was ultimately rejected by Gaston Gallimard. Despite this, it caught the attention of Jean Paulhan, a seminal figure of the French literary world and for a long time, until the Occupation, the editor of Gallimard's literary journal, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Paulhan, a collector of contemporary art and occasional critic, had then recently discovered Dubuffet's work. His accolade brought him a certain controversial reputation, along with many acquaintances with writers and a sustained dialogue about literature and art (see Dubuffet 2004).

In this context, Jean Paulhan penned, in 1945, a series of five very short stories destined to accompany the metro gouaches. The text and paintings remained an unpublished project that was revived a few years later when Dubuffet, casting aside the gouaches, drew a series of lithographic prints alongside which he copied out by hand Paulhan's text. Anna Louise Milne has described the whimsical quality and the falsely naïve style of some of Paulhan's writing of the time, and while this certainly applies to this text in *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*, it equally reflects the character of Dubuffet's images. They depict little groups of figures outlined in Dubuffet's trademark simplified, somewhat child-like style. His characters are shown seated on benches on the train platforms, waiting, clambering into trains, and squeezed into coaches. Complete with felt hats, bow ties, and handbags, the figures closely illustrate Paulhan's text, both in subject matter and in visual impact: the pictures are embedded within the text and drawn with the same thin lines than the handwritten text. Yet while the result suggests, visually, proximity between the two authors, in reality, Dubuffet and Paulhan approached the metro from polarized perspectives.

For Dubuffet, this archetypal urban subject matter had above all a provocative dimension – first of all, in the way in which it played with the conventional notion that painting thrives on light and on representing its effect on the surfaces of things. Depicting an underground space lit with artificial light only made a clear statement about the pedestrian nature Dubuffet wished to confer to his

art. If, furthermore, we read the metro series as invoking, metaphorically, an underground aesthetic, a secretive, dissident art practice removed from the mainstream, there was something paradoxical in taking as a subject matter for this purpose accidental gatherings of average, mainstream people, displaying a broad variety of human types. Grouped together and frozen still for a few minutes between two stops, they presented the artist with ready-made, constantly changing *tableaux vivants* that epitomized everyday life in all its banality and randomness. Yet these were also precisely the types he claimed were his ideal audience. Writing in January 1945 a pre-project for a conference on painting destined to a wide audience, Dubuffet explained: 'I would rather that my paintings amuse and interest the man on the street when he comes out of work, not the fanatic, the connoisseur, but the person who has no particular instruction or disposition' ('Avant-projet' 36, author's translation).

For Jean Paulhan, by contrast, the metro took on graver undertones. His short tales are allusive and metaphorical, evoking the hardship of the war, the dire economic situation of its immediate aftermath (his text is dated 20 June 1945), and the moral crisis of a society that had endured years of Occupation and emerged politically divided. Furthermore, Paulhan's allusion to the Resistance through the voice of one of his characters: '*d'ici trois mois, dit Castille, je devrais me cacher comme sous l'occupation*' ('Within three months, said Castille, I will have to hide myself, as under the Occupation'), recalls more generally the metro's historical as well as symbolic importance as a place of underground contestation of German authority. The metro indeed was the site of one of the first acts of resistance in 1941 when Pierre Georges Fabien, who later gave his name to the metro stop Colonel Fabien, shot dead a German soldier on 21 August at Barbès Rochechouart. Unlike Dubuffet, Paulhan had been an active member of the Resistance and his reference to underground secret action – even though he did not participate in the post-war cult of the Resistance – reads as another subtext in the book's otherwise more fanciful tone.

Differences, however, can be productive, and pursuing this idea of underground as resistance, the metro project can be read as anticipating a double form of underground thinking that marks an early turning point in Dubuffet's aesthetic. This change occurs through the process of translation by which Paulhan reacted to Dubuffet's gouaches of 1943 with a text to which, in return, Dubuffet responded by producing a new set of images, this time lithographs, in 1949. Translation here might imply mutual transformations of each author's ideas, and perhaps a productive misunderstanding by which the metro became something else than the sum of their diverging perspectives.

In 1949 Dubuffet was in a very different place than he had been in 1943. After resuming artistic practice tentatively in 1942 and becoming introduced into some important circles of the Parisian literary world, Dubuffet experienced controversial success with his first two solo exhibitions organized at the René Drouin Gallery on the Place Vendôme. This notoriety helped him in turn to gain a gallery representative in New York by 1947 and through this dealer, Pierre Matisse, a larger set of collectors, which was a relatively rare occurrence for an artist of his generation, but which meant, in this case, that by 1947 the Museum

of Modern Art in New York owned one of his paintings. Dubuffet had also authored a volume of writings on his aesthetic views and artistic practice, which Paulhan helped to collect and publish at Gallimard under the title *Prospectus aux amateurs de tout genre*.

In the period of six years between the metro painting and the book of lithographs, *La Métromanie*, his ideas about art had clearly shifted. The man on the street to whom he wanted to reach out, as he explained in 'Avant-projet d'une conférence populaire sur la peinture' (January 1945), did not warm up much to his work, as the violence of critical reactions to his exhibitions in the mainstream press showed. Within a few years, Dubuffet's attitude changed, a modification that was reflected in both his paintings and his writings. His 'Notes pour les fins lettres' ('Notes for the Well-Lettered'), also from 1945, dealt with broad aesthetic issues but through the more reduced prism of technical issues in painting. Developing a more difficult form of painting toned down to neutrals and thickly layered onto the canvas, coupled with a growing interest in marginalized forms of art production, Dubuffet also began to develop a conception of an art removed both from mainstream culture and from the avant-garde. In an important essay from 1949, he stated: 'True art is always where it is not expected, where nobody thinks of it nor says its name' ('L'Art Brut' 90-1, author's translation). As well as endowing art with a secretive quality, in praising qualities of elusiveness and secrecy, this sentence curiously visualized a process akin to political resistance activities, and evokes the vital constant mutability and secretiveness of resistance movements as during the Second World War.

These six years between 1943 and 1949 also witnessed a shift in Dubuffet's art practice. The metro painting and gouaches of 1943 showed flattened, simplified hieratic figures evocative of medieval stained glass. These gouaches were cited in the opening plates of the lithograph book of 1949 that displays similarities of style and composition. But immediately after, illustrating the first of the four short stories or playlets by Paulhan, Dubuffet shows figures embedded in a network of lines, scratches, and smudges. Entrenched deep in the landscape (the first story takes place in the countryside), the figures appear boxed into a tight, irregular spider-like web of lines and marks. The high horizon line that leaves only a small white strip at the top of the plate tilts the scenery forward to the surface of the page, as if Dubuffet was depicting the ground simultaneously from above and in cross section. In this way, the landscape depicted becomes at the same time a background and an underground. Both the tight enclosure of the figures that presses them into the ground and the sense of dual viewpoint are repeated in several plates that follow, as one story, leading to another, displaces the action from the countryside to the city and its metro. The last illustration located in a rural environment announces literally the descent into the metro by strikingly depicting a figure seen in profile, laying horizontally face down, but less toward the ground than already half immersed into it. The following image extends this visual theme. It shows a male figure standing in front of a map of the metro, stretching out an arm as if to search for his itinerary. Although the figure is depicted in front of the map, the contours of his body subtly merge with the network of metro lines and names of stops, and partly engulf him, making



2.4. Jean Dubuffet. *Adieu vieille terre...*, on page 13 of Jean Paulhan's *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*. Lithograph on paper, transferred to stone (1949).



2.5. Jean Dubuffet. Plate 3 of Jean Paulhan's *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*. Lithograph on paper, transferred to stone (1949).

unclear the limit between human figure and map. In a third image that marks the transition into the metro, Dubuffet boldly juxtaposes again two views: a profile view of a figure on top of the stairs leading into the metro, and a view of the staircase and the fence around the entrance to the metro surrounding the figure in a semi-circular shape.

This bringing together of different viewpoints, made by playing with the rules of 'correct' drawing and perspective, occurs repeatedly throughout the book. Hence a few striking plates further on in the book show figures set in an abstracted space made up of irregular hatchings. Barely visible save for their faces and grinning smiles, they seem embedded very deep underground, gesticulating as if trying either to extract themselves from the murky soil or on the contrary to take a regressive pleasure in being stuck into it. The lithographs of the *Métromanie* book depict space in a far more complex way than Dubuffet's earlier representations of the metro did. In the book, the flatness has given way to a newly created depth, which originates in the juxtaposition of viewpoints that disorientate the viewer.

In a text from 1945, Dubuffet had evoked his difficulty in the 1920s and 1930s to find an entry point into painting: '*je cherchais l'entrée*', he wrote ('Plus modeste' 90). With the metro series Dubuffet finds an entrance into more experimental work, stocking up ideas experimented in linear drawing that will later be translated into painting. The metro lithographs are, furthermore, a cipher by which Dubuffet displaces his '*je cherchais l'entrée*' into an '*entrée en matière*' as



2.6. Jean Dubuffet. Plate 8 of Jean Paulhan's *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*. Lithograph on paper, transferred to stone (1949).

Hubert Damisch, playing with words in an essay from 1985, called his entrance into another form of underground, far more organic and topographic.

The Undersides of Painting

This second form of underground is concerned with the material texture of painting, which, in Dubuffet's works, is achieved through extensive experimentation with a host of fine art and ordinary materials. A series of paintings from 1945-1946, dubbed '*Hautes Pâtes*' by the artist, exemplified his interest in what I want to see as another way of thinking the 'underground'. Those paintings reprised subject matters of his earlier series, *Marionnettes de la ville et de la campagne*, but swapped flat surfaces and primary colors for complex mixes of paint, sand, straw, pebbles, and other organic materials which created thick, dark-colored paintings in which figures were gouged rather than painted. These radical *Hautes Pâtes* paintings prefigured what became, after the metro lithographs of 1949, a main concern in Dubuffet's work for the decade that followed. From 1949 to 1960, the experimental quality of Dubuffet's paintings resides in his increasingly wild explorations of the capacity of painting to absorb extraneous materials. Putties and resins complement the natural materials introduced earlier. Announced by the metro lithographs and their experimental depiction of space, the works from the 1950s combine textural inventiveness with spatial disorientation. Dubuffet explores repeatedly the ground and the underground both in design and texture and through subject matter and technical approach. The last paintings of the decade, from the so-called *Matériologies* series, represent a complete fusion of these different interconnected aspects. A few key works mark the steps of this development toward the *Matériologies*. A 1951 painting, *Le Géologue* (The Geologist) is a key work in this respect, and one that Damisch mentions in the sentence quoted at the start of this essay.

Depicting a figure peering into the ground through a magnifying lens, standing over a vast expanse of indefinable ground, *The Geologist* launched Dubuffet's interest in the depiction of the ground and what is beneath it. The many characters and types riding the metro have now all disappeared but one. This solitary figure is itself gradually absorbed, devoured by the land around it as in another painting of the same series entitled eloquently *Le Voyageur sans boussole* (*The Traveller without a Compass*). If this is not strictly true of all the works of the early 1950s – many of them depict more or less clearly little characters clambering across expanses of land – the change of focus in these works from figure to the space surrounding them defines, what Jean Luc Nancy describes as what constitutes for him, in *Paysage avec dépaysement*, the genre of landscape painting. In a letter written from New York in early 1952, Dubuffet indeed described his increasingly bare, very textured expanses of paint in which occasionally a face or a character peers out, as being produced merely '*par force d'habitude*' ('by the force of habit').

Elaborating on this coming forth of the ground, the place, in landscape painting (hence the stress on *pays*, in *paysage*) Nancy writes: 'If I wanted to push it, I



2.7. Jean Dubuffet. *Le géologue*, oil on canvas (1950).

would say that instead of painting the countryside as a place, he paints it as its underside: what presents itself there is the announcement of what is not there' (114). Although it is somewhat of a facile pun, this idea of *endroit* which is an *envers* suggestively describes the rough stretches of land that are so devoid of any characteristics that they seem to depict not only the ground but also its other side, its underside. These places might be non-places, they might be the underground, the undergrowth or the soil seen from above, and throughout the 1950s, Dubuffet's painting seems to alternate between depicting plane and underground.

The surfaces of his paintings in the early 1950s, particularly from the *Paysage du mental* series, are indeed most often not only piled up (as they were in the *Hautes Pâtes* of the 1940s) but also filled with craters and recesses created by shrinking resins. When they are not as thick as these, in the *Pâtes battues* (*Beaten Pastes*) series of 1953 and 1954 that followed, the creamy top layer is scratched to reveal an under layer painted in a different way (Damisch *Fenêtre*). A few years later, Dubuffet resorts to another strategy to evoke the interplay between underground and above the ground. This consists, in his so-called *Texturologies*, in superimposing layers of projected speckles of paint of different but similar colors that create optical illusions of depth. The series that closed the decade of the 1950s, the *Matériologies*, present a kind of climax of this depiction of the ground. Completely devoid of figures or lines, these large works by Dubuffet's standards at this time consist in aggregations of natural and artificial materials, including tin foil, resins, and straw. There is no longer any suggestion of view-

point. In fact these are almost three-dimensional objects that evoke iron and copper ore, a chunk or slab that would have been carved out from a layer of the underground.

While these paintings go quite far in exemplifying art as underground, not only through representation, but through what this representation implies as a secretive practice, carried out in resistance against assimilation to prettiness and easy visual consumption – there is no eye candy here – there is another way to read them in terms of underground. Here we go back to Hubert Damisch and his interest in the undersides of painting. For Damisch, this notion goes back to Balzac's best-known novella *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*) in which one of the protagonists discovers the painting his master has kept hidden for so long. Peering beneath the mess of paint layers of the failed masterpiece, the viewer calls out: '*il y a une femme la dessous*' ('there is a woman under there'), or behind this, as the plot suggests this is a double entendre. The novella introduces for Damisch a reflection on the importance of the *dessous* or underside or underneath, a term that refers to the traditional secrets of coating and layering of painting in the secrecy of studio practice, as it evokes the more modern 'cuisine' of the painter, that is, the unorthodox experimentations with materials by which artists create their idiosyncratic touch. Delacroix is mentioned in this context, along with Jackson Pollock and, more to our point, Dubuffet.

Dubuffet's exploration of the undersides of painting, his experiments with materials, his way of piling them up thickly on the surface of his canvas or board, his depictions of the ground, and his scratching and gouging of surfaces, further present Damisch with an antithesis of the definition of modernist painting as proposed in mid-twentieth-century New York, by the critic Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg modernist painting defined itself by its particular attention to the medium and its properties: paint as well as the canvas and what he called its 'inherent flatness'. Thinking differently to Greenberg, Pollock, Dubuffet and several other artists, Damisch defines the underground, or, as he calls it, the *dessous*, as an alternative to flatness, and a primary quality of modern art. It is through this attention to the '*dessous*' that the historian gains a new understanding of the way in which artists break with illusionary perspective by delving into the physical properties of painting and exposing its undersides, which are traditionally left secret or hidden. In this idea of underlayer in painting, another interpretation of the underground appears. It becomes a criteria by which modern art can be re-interpreted, against the domination of the visual sense that is predominant in the Greenbergian version of modernism. Stressing the underside therefore means both working against this domination of the visual, against an idea of pure visibility and, as Damisch argues in reference to phenomenology, it also means to conceive of painting as an activity that engages all bodily senses rather than exclusively vision (*Fenêtre* 116-17).

Underground and Avant-Garde

By way of an extended conclusion I want to return to the period of the metro to address a third dimension of the idea of underground. In the title of the book, *La Métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*, the first word, *métromanie* – translated as ‘metromania’ in English – is diverted from its usual meaning of an obsession with writing verse. It is meant to signify instead the kind of dizziness that overcomes the obsessive metro rider, the passenger who, having punched his ticket in the morning, spends his entire day criss-crossing the city, riding the metro as a merry-go-round. The manic behavior described by Paulhan in his text hints to another type of obsession, closer in fact to the original meaning of metromania, the compulsion not of writing verse, but of drawing and painting. This type of compulsion, found first in individuals whose works Dubuffet began to collect in Switzerland, prompted by the famous 1922 book by Hans Prinzhorn, *Bildnerie der Geisteskranken*, began to interest him at the same time as he worked on the metro versions, and was shared with Jean Paulhan.

Art Brut (a term translated by Roger Cardinal in 1972 as ‘outsider art’), became Dubuffet’s version of Prinzhorn’s psychopathological art, although, as Dubuffet staunchly claimed, the two were different. Art Brut for Dubuffet referred more specifically to visual productions of people he found living at the margins of society in social or psychological isolation, who had never had training in the visual arts and were in effect sheltered from mainstream culture through a diversity of circumstances such as imprisonment or confinement in a retirement home or an asylum. These were not artists in the cultural, socially acknowledged sense of the term, nor were they psychotics whose graphic productions were studied by psychiatric doctors, as in Prinzhorn’s publication. Rather, what Dubuffet found so important in the Art Brut ‘artists’ he found and identified as such is that they were animated by a compulsion to create, something that Dubuffet believed was absent in what he called ‘cultural artists’, including in members of the avant-garde. Dubuffet shared this interest in Art Brut with a group of writers that included Paulhan alongside André Breton and Henri-Pierre Roché, and he federated this enthusiasm by creating in 1947 the Foyer de l’Art Brut in order to collect funds and administer the growing collection he was compiling. Paulhan was one of his early companions in this. The pair traveled across Switzerland in 1945 during an early research trip that the writer recounted in a short book, *Guide d’un petit voyage en Suisse*.

While the term ‘Art Brut’ does in no way apply to Dubuffet’s own production as is sometimes wrongly assumed, Art Brut did constitute for him the ideal model of an art driven – as Damisch has put it – by ‘inner necessity’. Dubuffet’s rhetorical attempts to place himself apart from other art movements, rejecting for instance the label *informel* that came to define the more organic abstract painting of the 1950s, and his efforts to construct himself a very specific, isolated position on the contemporary French art scene testify to this idea of Art Brut as an ideal model for artistic practice

As a secretive, marginal, alternative practice of art, Art Brut constitutes, an epitome of underground thinking. If Dubuffet defined Art Brut as the opposite of

mainstream art (notably in a lecture and essay entitled 'Art brut préféré aux arts culturels', from 1949), Art Brut as a notion may also help shape more generally an influential idea of the underground as a form of aesthetic resistance, following a common meaning of the term in the English language. This of course is anachronistic to some degree: the 1962 edition of the Littré dictionary does not contain the English term 'underground', although a more recent edition from Le Robert does.

In the metro pictures, Dubuffet transformed the political associations of resistance evoked by Jean Paulhan in his text into purely aesthetic ones. This transformation process, which is visible in Dubuffet's writings of the same period, was further developed in the paintings of the 1950s that evoke, in increasingly abstract terms, the underground understood literally as 'what is under the ground'. Along with the *Hautes Pâtes* from the mid-1940s, it is upon these works that Hubert Damisch's theory of the undersides of painting has rested, as a form of aesthetic dissidence in relation to the orthodoxy of flatness in modernist painting. Further, with Art Brut, Dubuffet was able to create and theorize upon a movement that placed itself far beyond the avant-garde, in a sense, as an anti-avant-garde, an ultimate, almost tautological underground, since the authors who were part of it were so estranged from mainstream culture that they were not even aware of being 'artists' or of being in a movement.

Together, these different ways of interpreting the notion of underground take steps into outlining a posture that sought to distance itself from the so called 'historical' avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s of which Dubuffet was a firsthand witness, and sometimes participant in the course of his early artistic experiments in a period he later dubbed his 'prehistory'. In attempting to function *against* the 'historical' avant-garde, Dubuffet's reflection on the underground aims to locate another space of aesthetic contestation, one that he liked to call *anticultural*, as in his lecture 'Anticultural Positions'. This radical re-thinking of the avant-garde and of aesthetic dissent is what made Dubuffet a precious example for some of the artists who, in the 1950s and 1960s, also called in their own terms for an anticultural positioning. His work was hence much admired by some of the artists that formed CoBrA, for its raw visual quality and effort to 'unlearn' drawing. It also served as a model for the early Claes Oldenburg, who translated Dubuffet's idea of anti-culture in the context of the United States and its a-cultural condition (see Berrebi 'Paris Circus'). At the same time however, the source of that aesthetic, in being closely connected to that modern, industrial invention, the '*metropolitain*', remained firmly anchored in a notion of underground that the 1960s avant-garde movements, discussed in other chapters in this book, would transform in a more radical way.