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Jean H. Duffy, *Perceiving Dubuffet: Art, Embodiment, and the Viewer*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. xxv + 411 pp. Figures, notes, references, and index. £85.00. (hb). ISBN 9781789621693.

Review by Stephanie Chadwick, Lamar University.

As Jean H. Duffy notes on page one of her new book *Perceiving Dubuffet: Art, Embodiment, and the Viewer*, Jean Dubuffet remains one of the most significant and influential artists of the latter half of the twentieth century. The impact of his painting and sculpture can be seen in the production of a wide variety of late modern and contemporary art, while his writings about art, creativity, and collecting “Art Brut” (his term for the creative production of ostensible cultural outsiders) have moved the collecting and exhibiting of untrained artists’ works to the mainstream. A great paradox of Dubuffet’s career was his oft-touted rejection of “cultured” art (indeed, of the mainstream culture and its institutions) that his course, crudely formed renderings and mixed-media works were meant to challenge, while cultivating an audience of aficionados for his own art at the close of WWII.[1] Although he created diverse bodies of work throughout his long career and into the final years of his life in the mid 1980s, his anticultural stance remained constant. As Duffy points out—and in contrast to Dubuffet’s claims that art made from a purely internal creative impetus for no audience at all is best—he produced his work with the viewer in mind. It was precisely the viewer’s engagement that Dubuffet cultivated with his aggressive marks and irreverent humor to craft pictorial, sculptural, even (at times) architectural encounters. An artistic approach “that correlates well with phenomenological understandings of the relationship between pre-reflective and reflective experience,” according to Duffy, was another constant across Dubuffet’s oeuvre (p. 17). Duffy situates her analysis in relation to this interest, to the historical arc of Dubuffet’s work, and to its critical and scholarly reception.

Although Dubuffet’s art has continued to attract inquisitive viewers, as Duffy notes, critical interest appeared to wane briefly toward the end of the twentieth century, when the crude assertiveness for which his early painting achieved notoriety no longer seemed quite so radical, and when the popular late style of his Hourloupe Cycle of two- and three-dimensional work appeared to be more playful. The past decade, however, has seen a significant resurgence of both exhibitions and critical attention.[2] Duffy aims to enrich the discourse on Dubuffet and expand upon it in a more comprehensive way, working to surpass the studies of particular works and themes being explored by a number of scholars that she engages in her volume. As Duffy elaborates, hers is a cohesive analysis of Dubuffet’s various overlapping series and the ways in which, as she persuasively argues, the artist’s work engages the viewer not only visually but also

haptically (in terms of tactile experience), kinetically (in terms of movement), and kinesthetically (in terms of sensory engagement and navigation).

As Duffy notes, analysis of Dubuffet's work has, until rather recently, been shaped by the sheer force and volume of his own writing about his methods and the Art Brut he tirelessly promoted, which helped establish his persona as an art world maverick. His Art Brut proselytizing and the calculating way in which he situated his work ambivalently in relation to this artistic paradigm set the interpretive tone for decades. In her volume, as in her previously published articles, Duffy joins the ranks of new interpretations of Dubuffet's practice.^[3] And while some of the scholars with which Duffy engages in her book, including myself, have found renewed interest in Dubuffet's experimental art and critically examined it in relation to his writings and cultural appropriations (Art Brut, children's art, the art of various cultures that differed markedly from that produced in the West), Duffy seeks in her book to combine both comprehensive and theoretically-oriented approaches.^[4] She does this by considering Dubuffet's work--particularly his working through of multiple series--in relation to phenomenological philosophies that had great currency during his career.

Phenomenology has become a rather accepted aspect of Dubuffet's work. Indeed, as Duffy notes, art historian Hubert Damisch applied this approach to interpreting Dubuffet's art as early as 1962. Yet Duffy delves more deeply into this inquiry. Situating her discussion in relation to the ideas of phenomenologists Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she explores the artist's production in relation to the ideas that put the question of embodiment at the very center of discourse in the postwar years and throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, spanning the entirety of Dubuffet's artistic career. Duffy's nuanced analyses, grounded in archival research and close looking at Dubuffet's art and writing--with an eye for not only visual but also bodily engagement--provides an important contribution to the scholarship on this artist. Her analyses well support her central claim that the artist's characteristic strategies to defamiliarize the viewer aligned with Merleau-Ponty's brand of phenomenological reduction, espoused most famously in his 1945 *Phénoménologie de la perception*, in which habituated questions and assumptions about the nature of particular objects are bracketed/set aside to focus on the lived experience of the encounter.^[5] Thus, as Duffy convincingly argues, Dubuffet's works have the capacity to effect a pre-reflective mode of perceptual experience. The book's fifty color plates and forty-three figures of paintings and works in various media spanning Dubuffet's oeuvre provide ample visual support for Duffy's claims.

Following her introduction of Dubuffet's work in relation to phenomenological inquiries, each of Duffy's eight chapters features a cross-series consideration of the artist's work with regard to particular themes or sets of imagery that she sees as alluding to these concerns. She expounds upon these ideas in chapter one, considering Dubuffet's childlike renderings of figures dancing, milking cows, and other activities, everyday objects and experiences, and his efforts to destabilize word and image relationships and categories--subjects she takes up in subsequent chapters in relation to other of Dubuffet's series. She also considers his textured surfaces that allude to skin or to the ground, for which her citation of his *Topographies* and *Texturologies* is apt. Of Duffy's discussions in chapter one, perhaps the most insightful is her argument that by means of materiality and gesture and by depicting ordinary, quotidian activities, Dubuffet aimed to produce a response in the viewer involving not only "mindfulness of and reflection about one's own corporeal experience but also, in some instances, a degree of kinesthetic empathy" (pp. 33-34).

Duffy treats chapters two and three as companions considering Dubuffet's unorthodox treatment of the body and face, respectively. Chapter two considers the themes of corporeality and "body-environment connectedness" (p. 28), which Duffy examines in Dubuffet's various carnivalesque bodies, his de-aestheticization of the female nude in his *Corps de dames*, his frequent relating of the body to the landscape, and his depictions of embodied social interaction. Chapter three considers the artist's various depictions of faces, most notably in his portrait series and *Plus beaux qu'ils croient* (Better Looking Than They Think) exhibition, considering also Dubuffet's references to sensory organs as a means to evoke "reflective-sensory responsiveness" (p. 112) and common embodied experiences. Her discussion of Dubuffet's *Petites statues de la vie précaire* is perhaps the most persuasive of the many examples she cites in this chapter, noting the ways in which the viewer's movement around the sculptures encourage active viewing and interpretation of facial patterns.

Chapters four and five consider Dubuffet's interest in memory and "corporeal knowhow" in relation to Merleau-Ponty's concepts of body and habit memory (p. 143). Chapter four explores these ideas in Dubuffet's figures that suggest navigation of space, time, and the environment. Duffy considers these depictions across multiple series, considering routine motions that are learned and that, as she argues, align with the artist's fascination with movement, quotidian activities, and pre-reflective modes of human experience. Duffy extends her analysis to include figures using objects and machines, which she views through the lens of Heidegger's tool analysis. Her discussions of women grinding coffee *Mouleuse de café* and *Cafetière (ou mouleuse de café)* are particularly intriguing, invoking the entanglement of the body, making, and tool use characterized by Marcel Duchamp's grinders and mechanized brides. Chapter four also explores Dubuffet's many depictions of musicians and dancers, which seem particularly demonstrative of the body memory and tool use she argues fascinated the artist.

In chapter five, Duffy examines the *Théâtres de memoir* (*Theaters of Memory*) assemblages of Dubuffet's acrylic paintings, which she situates in relation to her phenomenological analysis. In Duffy's view, these twentieth-century works call to mind the conceptual memory theater of Renaissance philosopher Giulio Camillo. Whereas Camillo created his mnemonic device to spatialize and thus preserve and retrieve memory, however, Duffy sees Dubuffet's assemblages as engaging more materially with the very processes of recollection. The conceptually three-dimensional spaces of the memory theater are flattened out in Dubuffet's series, in which cut-and-paste assembling enacts modern understandings of the layering of memories and processes of retrieval. Duffy argues they serve as both a template and a foil for Dubuffet's work. Considering Dubuffet's anti-taxonomical bent, Duffy notes, it is no surprise the *Theaters of Memory* accentuate the distortions, discontinuities, and selectivity of perception and recollection.

Chapters six and seven deal with Dubuffet's engagement with temporal as well as spatial elements and themes. As Duffy elaborates in chapter six, Dubuffet's fascination with time manifests in his choice of subjects, media, processes, titling, and treatment of space, adding that his depictions of human activities and natural and geological processes form patterns across his oeuvre. Her discussion of his Hourloupe works are engaging, particularly the ways in which his Hourloupe script and occlusion of clock faces in works such as *Le Train de pendules* both invite and frustrate our desire for structured experience, provoking instead the opacity of our experiential relationship with time. Her comparison of Dubuffet's tabletops (covered with documents indicating the passage of time) to Dutch Realism is insightful, though a more nuanced

consideration of these works in relation to Cubist tabletops (prefiguring Dubuffet's play with two- and three-dimensionality) would enhance this analysis. Chapter six also explores Dubuffet's interest in graffiti and messages, interesting discussions that could form the basis of a separate chapter. In another discussion that could easily occupy its own chapter, Duffy considers the *Topographies*, *Texturologies*, *Matèriologies*, and *Phénomènes* series as works representing Dubuffet's interest in organic and geological processes—aspects of deep time that encompass human experience and unfold even in the absence of human interlocutors.

Chapter seven deals with movement and temporal experience in Dubuffet's landscapes with figures produced in the 1950s, his Paris Circus series of the 1960s, and his large-scale sculptures and Hourloupe environments of the 1960s-70s. Here, she elaborates on the tensions between the artist's depictions of harried, destination-focused travelers, on the one hand, and "wayfarers" who enjoy a sense of adventure, improvisation, and exploration, on the other hand. In each case she sees the "traveler motif" as representing engagement with the world. Duffy's reading of the Paris Circus series—representing the frenetic pace of task-oriented movement and quotidian routines—as vulgar and carnivalesque is convincing, based on their graffitiquesque figures and storefront signs. Exploring the word and image interplay instilled by these crude shop fronts, Duffy extends discussions she began in earlier chapters regarding Dubuffet's ludic titles.

Chapter eight situates Dubuffet's engagement, during the last years of his life (the early 1980s), with both phenomenology and language in relation to his readings in science, which Duffy gleans from the artist's library at the Fondation Dubuffet, Paris. To Duffy's eye, Dubuffet uses "the most elementary practices of children's art" (namely, the scribble-like marks in his *Mire* series of acrylic paintings) to evoke ideas and phenomena described by theoretical physics that exceeded ordinary language and habituated comprehension in the wake of Einstein (p. 278). Her situation of Dubuffet's interest in perceiving—and how culture, language, and habit even in the domain of science affect it—brings a fresh perspective to Dubuffet scholarship. Especially interesting is her discussion of the work in relation to physicist Ilya Prigogine's theory of Dissipative Structures that are "open and responsive" to their environment (p. 291). Noting that this theory impacted many areas of the arts and sciences and informed Michel Thévoz's 1984 reading of Dubuffet's *Mires*, Duffy argues convincingly for its attunement to Dubuffet's improvisational artistic approach. [6] Viewed through this lens, as Duffy argues, the "uncentered, all-over patterning" of Dubuffet's ostensibly abstract *Mires* suggests "dynamic processes" and the vibrancy of lived experience (p. 292). Duffy's conclusion provides an insightful reading of Dubuffet's *Parcours*, a six-meter, screen-printed scroll, in relation to the phenomenological and linguistic issues she raises throughout her book.

A strength of the book is its holistic exploration of themes, motifs, and patterns across Dubuffet's vast oeuvre. This approach also sets up the book's main weaknesses, however, which is that the chapters appear to take on too much and the impact of some key discussions gets lost amidst the many listings of examples of particular motifs. The clipped pace of the discussion of exemplary works and series, often in quick successions of inventories, can at times be rather tedious and a bit confusing. Although the arguments might have benefitted from reducing the vast number of examples to home in on more nuanced and focused discussions of key works, the body of Duffy's evidence more than proves her case, providing some fresh insights into many of the threads that comprise Dubuffet scholarship.

NOTES

[1] Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions" (1951), in Richard L. Feigen, *Dubuffet and the Anticulture* (New York: R. L. Feigen & Co, 1969), insert; Jean Dubuffet, "In Honor of Savage Values" (1951), trans. Kent Minturn, *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 46 (Autumn 2004): 259-265; Jean Dubuffet, "Notes for the Well-Read," in Mildred Glimcher, *Jean Dubuffet: Towards an Alternative Reality*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Pace Publications, 1987), pp. 68-86.

[2] A few notable, recent exhibitions include *Jean Dubuffet: Soul of the Underground*, October 18, 2014-Oct. 5, 2015 at the Museum of Modern Art; *Jean Dubuffet, "Anticultural Positions,"* April 15, 2016-June 10, 2016 at Aquavella Galleries, New York; *Jean Dubuffet, Barbarian in Europe*, April 24, 2019-September 2, 2019 at the Mucem, Marseille and partner institutions; and *Brutal Beauty*, May 17, 2021-Aug. 22, 2021.

[3] See also Jean H. Duffy, "Jean Dubuffet's Beautiful People," *Word & Image* vol. 35, no. 2 (June 2019): 191-209; and Jean H. Duffy, "Dubuffet Plays Hide-and-Seek: Lineage, Reflexivity, and Perception in Coucou Bazar," *The Art Bulletin* vol. 97, no. 2 (June 2016): 237-260.

[4] See also Stephanie Chadwick, "Radical Reconfiguration: Appropriation, Assemblage, and Hybridity in Jean Dubuffet's Portrait of Jean Paulhan," *Art Inquiries*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 47-66; Stephanie Chadwick, "Double Take: Jean Dubuffet's Portrait of Antonin Artaud and the Balinese Theater," in *Doppelgangers, Alter Egos, and Mirror Images in Western Art, 1840-2010*, ed. Mary Edwards (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2020), pp. 114-128; and Stephanie Chadwick, *Jean Dubuffet, Bricoleur: Portraits, Pastiche, Performativity* (London: Bloomsbury Art and Visual Culture, forthcoming).

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

[6] Michel Thévoz, "Structures dissipatives," in *Jean Dubuffet: Mires* (Paris: Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1984).

Stephanie Chadwick
Lamar University
schadwick2@lamar.edu

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