



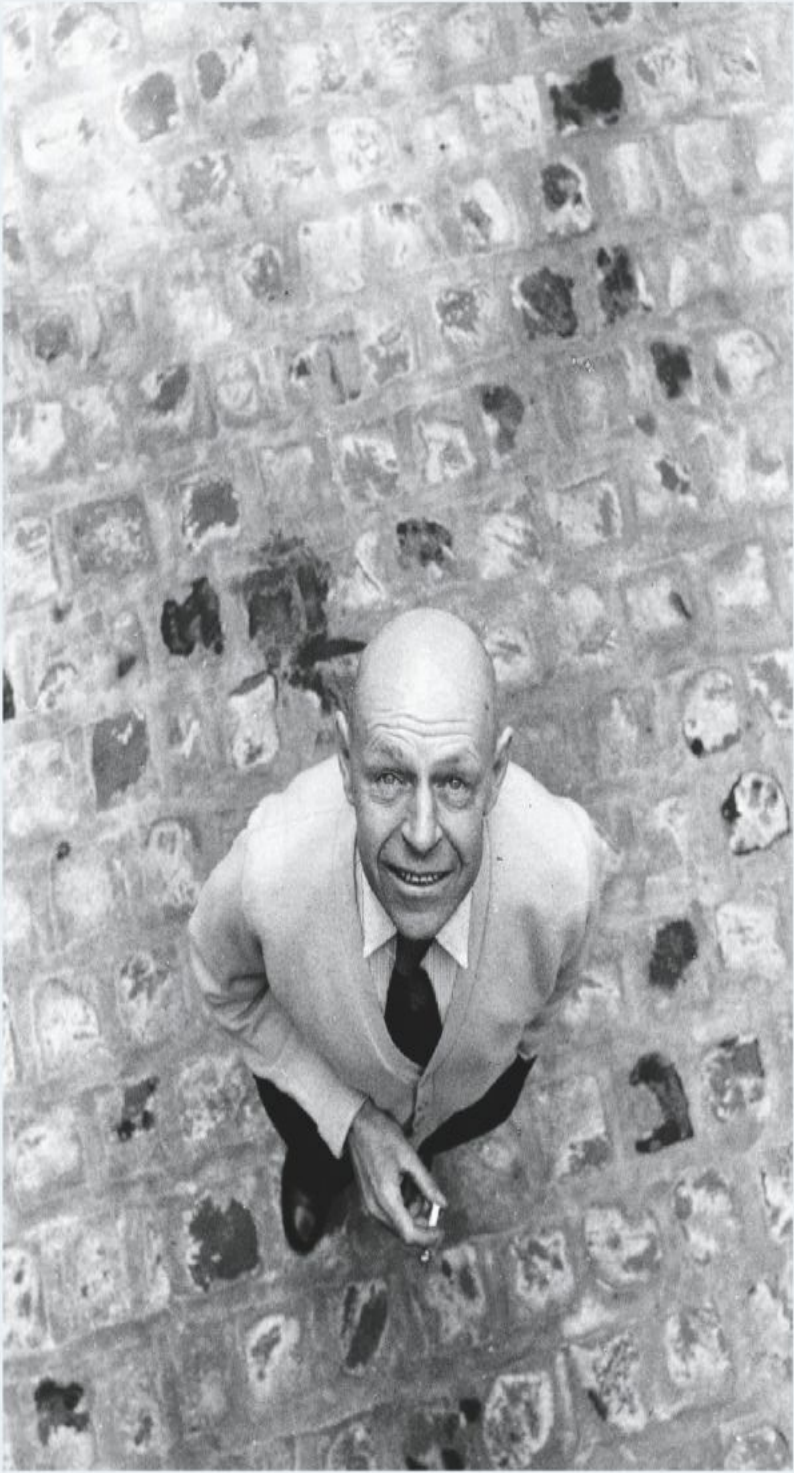
JEAN DUBUFFET

BRUTAL BEAUTY

J. Dubuffet
54

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EDITED BY
ELEANOR NAIRNE

barbican

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FOREWORD

Jean Dubuffet wrote 'Notes for the Well-Read' in 1945, soon after he devoted himself to becoming an artist.¹ The text is made up of a sequence of exhortations, organized under amusing subtitles that reflect many of the concerns that would captivate him for the rest of his career: 'Animate the Material', 'Even More Hazardous', 'Not Too Rich', 'A Big Spree', 'Lay It On Thick', 'The Blaze on Every Forehead', 'The Grace of Simple Gestures', 'Country Wine Rather Than Château-Lafite' and 'Art that Doesn't Know its Own Name'.² For those familiar with Dubuffet's writing (and there is no shortage of it with which to familiarize yourself), his idiom is impossible to miss: a heady blend of gastronomic and alchemical imagery, used to conjure a vision of how forcefully art might respond to the human condition, if only it could be liberated from the straitjacket of *beaux-arts* conventions.³

For Dubuffet, the painter handles 'enchanted materials that seem to have a will of their own ... like someone who wields lightning. The brushes are magical: they work wonders ... lo and behold: a miracle, wizardry!⁴ The artist's role is to listen and respond – acknowledging in so doing the fundamental continuity between all forms of matter. Why stock your studio with specialist tubes of paint which carry the pretence of belonging to another (rarefied) time and place? In an essay from 1946, the critic Michel Tapié catalogued how Dubuffet had taken to mixing his paint with substances as diverse as gravel, tar, sand, coal dust, pebbles, slithers of string and shards of mirror.⁵ In 1951, Robert Doisneau photographed the artist sitting amid this lively array of materials in his studio in Paris (fig. 1). The image speaks to a question posed recently by poet and critic Maggie Nelson: 'empirically speaking, we are made from star stuff. Why aren't we talking more about that?'⁶

When Dubuffet wrote his polemical text, he was living and working in the heart of liberated Paris, surrounded by the devastation of the Second World War. He dedicated himself to innovation, scavenging, amateurism – 'grope your way backwards!⁷ – in the hope of capturing more authentically something of everyday life; what he would later describe in his famous lecture at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1951 as 'a very direct and very sincere expression of our real life and our real moods'.⁸ The horror of recent events had made Academic easel painting look at best polite and at worst obsolete. Some thought Dubuffet's work had astonishing vitality; others found the gritty aesthetic too much to stomach. The artist cared little either way: 'let the artist's mind, his moods and impressions, be offered raw, with their smells still vivid, just as you eat a herring without cooking it, but right after pulling it from the sea, when it's still dripping.'⁹

Dubuffet's experimental drive won him the admiration of an array of younger artists – from Claes Oldenburg to Paula Rego, David Hockney, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Chuck Close, Mike Kelley, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. It is surprising, then, that a major overview of his work is so long overdue in the UK; this is the first large-scale exhibition since the Tate Gallery's in April 1966.¹⁰ Prior to that, Dubuffet had had an influential solo exhibition in 1955 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, where he was an important figure for the Independent Group, among them the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, who had coined the phrase 'New Brutalism' in 1953, which the architectural writer Reyner Banham would go on to define.¹¹ The affinities between Dubuffet's aesthetic and the Barbican's brutalist sensibility are reflected in their parallel dates: built on a site razed during the Blitz in December 1940, the Barbican opened its doors as an arts centre in March 1982, with a group exhibition called *Aftermath: France 1945–54 / New Images of Man*, featuring work by Dubuffet. He had established himself as an artist in 1942 and died in 1985.

Given that more than fifty years have lapsed since the last significant presentation of Dubuffet's work in the UK, this exhibition runs chronologically, with chapters from across the full arc of his artistic life. From 1942 to 1985, he amassed enough work to fill 38 volumes cataloguing his career, so no attempt is made to be exhaustive. Instead, emphasis is given to Dubuffet's special insight into the fabric of inner life ('inward tapestries, the imaginary texture of the real', as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty memorably described it¹²) as well as to the impassioned spirit with which he went about making and writing about art. Both of these strengths were deeply connected to his interest in Art Brut, a term he coined in 1945 to describe work made by those he saw as 'untouched by artistic culture'.¹³ His definition would shift over time, but at this early point he was referring to a broad range of work made by self-taught artists, including children, psychiatric patients, graffitiists, prisoners and tattooists.

The two sections dedicated to Art Brut in this exhibition reflect the two key phases of Dubuffet's activity: from 1945 to 1951, when he was first researching, collecting and exhibiting Art Brut in the basement of René Drouin gallery in Paris; and the period from 1962 to 1971, when (in one of those bizarre twists of history) the collection returned from a decade spent in the midst of the Abstract Expressionist community in Long Island, and Dubuffet rehung the works in a mansion on the rue de Sèvres and began actively researching and collecting again. The eighteen artists presented in these two spaces represent just a fraction of the collection, and yet their work makes clear why Dubuffet found

himself so intoxicated; the sense of sheer determination that had brought this work into being and the radical invention that made Dubuffet see 'sparks fly' contrasted starkly with what he called the 'impenetrable, vitamin-lacking' art admired in intellectual circles at the time.¹⁴ The return of the collection also contributed to the birth of Dubuffet's 'Hourloupe' series in 1962, molten red and blue forms intended to dissolve the line between the real and the imaginary, which represented a major aesthetic break for him that is rarely given much attention in accounts of his career.

This book is divided into chronological chapters, each featuring an introductory text, a new essay and images of work from that period, many of which have been specially re-photographed for this occasion. Our thanks go to the esteemed authors – Kent Minturn, Rachel Perry, Sarah Wilson, Sarah Lombardi, Sophie Berrebi and Camille Houzé – for their rich and insightful essays, which have been crafted from extensive archival research and an intimate understanding of Dubuffet's distinctive sensibility. The project simply would not have been possible without the support of the Fondation Dubuffet in Paris, and our warm thanks go to Sophie Weibel, as well as to Déborah Couette, for offering us their unrivalled authority on the subject of Jean Dubuffet and for being so good-humoured about our peculiarly English perspective. We have also worked closely with the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne and are deeply grateful to Sarah Lombardi and Astrid Berglund, as well as to Vincent Monod, for their generosity in supporting the vital Art Brut sections of this exhibition.

Dubuffet was a great believer in the power of disruption: 'force the mind out of its usual ruts ... all bristle after the bewildering removal from their familiar surroundings (like an attacked porcupine sticking out its spines), all the faculties of the mind are aroused'.¹⁵ Little did we know when we embarked on this project in 2018 that it would be thrown into such jeopardy by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. While Dubuffet might have felt energized by the world being turned topsy-turvy (and certainly his philosophy has come to feel ever more relevant to our strange new reality), we must express enormous appreciation to our lenders for enabling the project to go ahead despite the circumstances. We would also like to share our regret that the change in dates meant that we were no longer able to partner with the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in Canada – we thank our lenders for supporting the vision of this exhibition on both sides of the Atlantic and we greatly look forward to finding another opportunity to collaborate with the MNBAQ in the not too distant future.

We would like to express our considerable gratitude to: Collection les Abattoirs, Musée – Frac Occitanie Toulouse; Acquavella Modern Art, New York; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Art Expressions LLC, New York; Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne; Fondation Dubuffet, Paris; Arne and Milly Glimcher; Amy Gold and Brett Gorvy; Collection Karsten Greve, St Moritz; Fine Art Advice, Geneva; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Morton and Linda Janklow; Galerie Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk; Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Cordes-sur-Ciel; Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris; Musée Unterlinden, Colmar; Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique; The Museum of Everything, London; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; David and Ezra Nahmad; Galerie Natalie Seroussi, Paris; The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Olnick Spanu Collection, New York; Pace Gallery, New York; The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation Collection, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,

New York; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Tate; Édouard Ullmo; Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Collection Olivier Varenne, Geneva; the Wexner Family Collection; as well as to those lenders who wish to remain anonymous.

An exhibition of this kind requires years of research and development, and we would like to thank all of the individuals who have been in discussion with us during the shaping of the show, in particular the contributors to the book, as well as well Tracey Bashkoff, Martin Bland, Raphaël Bouvier, James Brett, Janet Briner, Baptiste Brun, Harry Cooper, Tamara Corn, Isabelle Dervaux, Olivier Gabet, Arne Glimcher, Paul Gray, Frances Morris and Sarah Suzuki. A special thank you goes to Blanca Huertas, Senior Curator of Lepidoptera at the Natural History Museum, London, for her assistance in identifying the various butterfly species in Dubuffet's collages. We would also like to thank Sotheby's and Waddington Custot for their generous financial support of the exhibition, as well as Bauwerk for kindly supplying their modern lime-wash paint to create mineral-rich gallery spaces worthy of Dubuffet's work.

There is, of course, no small irony in Dubuffet's 'anticultural' project finding itself within a public arts centre – as Hal Foster described in his 2018 lecture at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, this was one of the fundamental double binds of modernism.¹⁶ Our collaboration with the architects Witherford Watson Mann and the graphic designers The Bon Ton – who have also been responsible for the elegant design of this publication – has focused on how to create a dynamic context in which the radicality of Dubuffet's 'brutal beauty' could be felt anew. Our thanks go to Stephen Witherford, William Mann, Philippa Battye, Amy Preston and Amélie Bonhomme for their creative flair, which has made this design collaboration so thoroughly enjoyable.

We would also like to give our heartfelt thanks to the whole Barbican team. Camille Houzé has worked tirelessly on the research, picking up from Jessica Freeman-Attwood in the very early days of the project and developing an immense wealth of knowledge that has brought colour and detail to every aspect of the exhibition and publication. Charlotte Flint has led on much of the research and development of the Art Brut elements of the show, which have been enriched by her sensitivity and passion for this work. Taz Chappell and Kate Fanning have overseen the organization of the exhibition with meticulous attention to detail and very good grace, especially given the levels of global uncertainty, and Alice Lobb has kindly ensured that her expertise and sympathy were always on hand.

'An artwork is all the more enthralling the more of an adventure it has been on,' Dubuffet declared in his 'Notes for the Well-Read', 'particularly if it bears the mark of this adventure.'¹⁷ If the same is true for an exhibition and its publication, then our visitors and readers should certainly be in for a good ride.

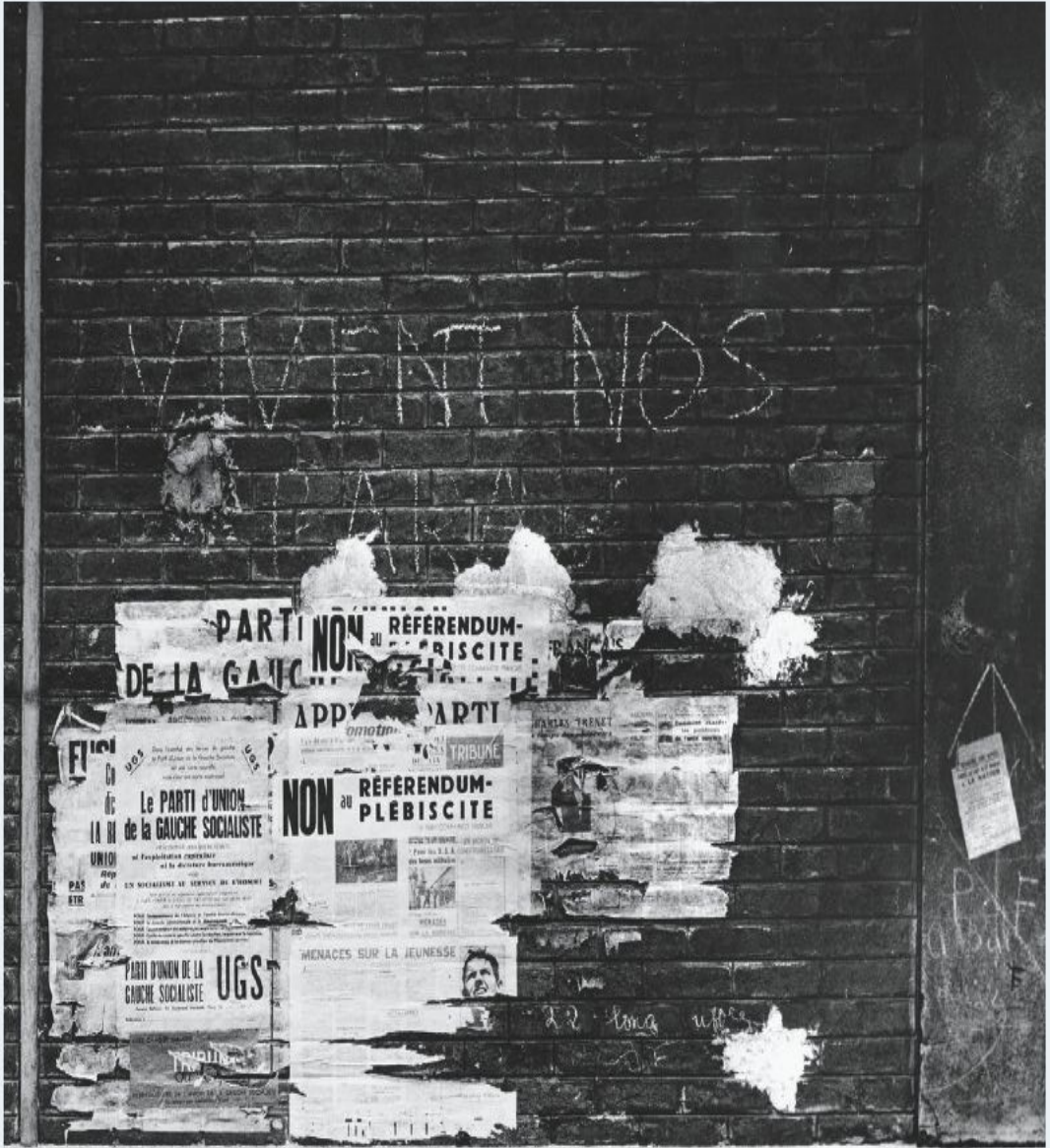
Jane Alison, Head of Visual Arts

Eleanor Nairne, Curator

FIG. 1. PREVIOUS
Dubuffet in his studio,
Paris, 1951. Photograph
by Robert Doisneau

FIG. 2. OPPOSITE
Dubuffet in his studio,
Vence, 1958. Photograph
by John Craven





MATTER AND MEMORY

'It's the person in the street that I'm after ... they are the one I want to please and enchant.'¹

In June 1944, just days after American troops landed in Normandy, Dubuffet made a series of sixteen graffiti-inspired 'Messages' in which he scrawled fragments of text over French and German newspapers: 'Always dedicated to your orders'; 'the key is under the shutter'; 'I've been thinking of you'.² The intimacy of these handwritten notes contrasts sharply with the formality of the type beneath, suggesting the swell of conflicting information during the Occupation and the impossibility of knowing which source to believe. Dubuffet considered the walls of Paris to be poignant surfaces, their dense scars and inscriptions bearing witness to the past and present lives of the city. He greatly admired the photographs of Parisian graffiti by Brassai, which had been published in the magazine *Minotaure* in 1933, and shared in his belief that the wall is a site of primal expression, giving 'its voice to that part of us which, without it, would be condemned to silence'.³

Dubuffet would walk the streets of Paris in search of graffiti, often accompanied by his friend René de Solier, who wrote a 'Short Treatise on Graffiti' ('Court traité des graffiti') in 1945.⁴ Lithography was the perfect medium for Dubuffet's interest in the subject, as he could attack the stone to create the impression of textured walls (an experiment that he would later expand into scratching through layers of paint). The two series included here were made with the 'master printer' Fernand Moulot and give a vivid impression of everyday life persisting despite the Occupation. The title of *Matter and Memory, or the Lithographers at School* (*Matière et mémoire ou les lithographes à l'école*) comes from the poet Francis Ponge, who wrote a text to accompany the album, and borrows from the leading French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose theory of *élan vital* or 'vital impulse' argued that there is a force of life immanent to all organisms.⁵ Dubuffet's work in this period is devoted to these unexpected traces of life, reflecting his fundamental belief that 'the very basic ... scribbles traced on a wall with a knife-point' have more 'precious meaning than most ... large pretentious paintings'.⁶

Brassai, *Untitled (Sans titre)*,
from the 'Graffiti' series, c.1940

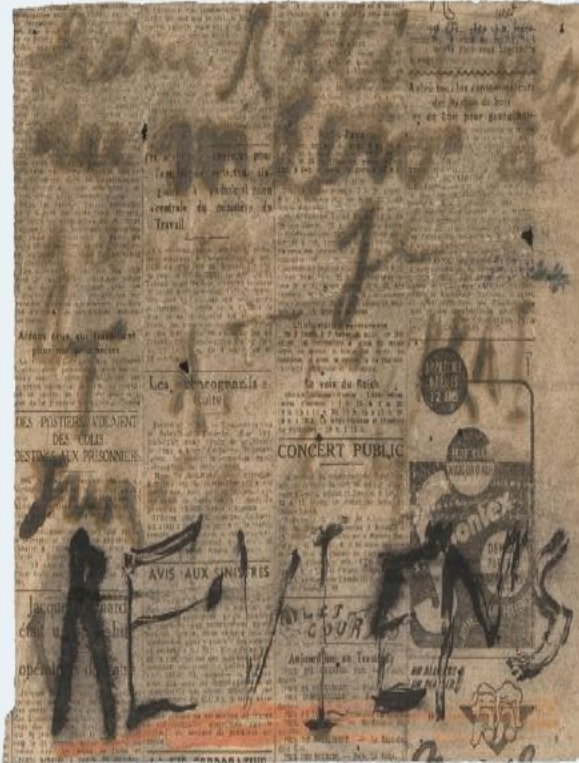
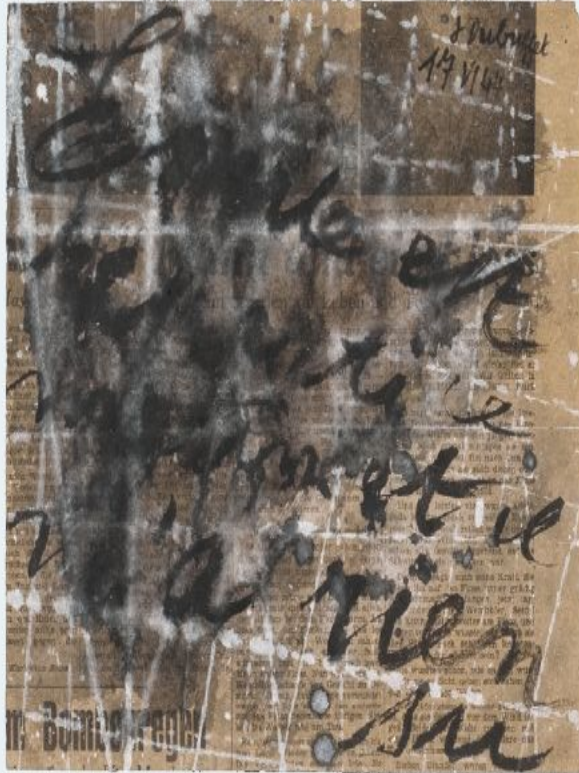
Eleanor Nairne

WALL WITH INSCRIPTIONS
(*MUR AUX INSCRIPTIONS*), APRIL 1945



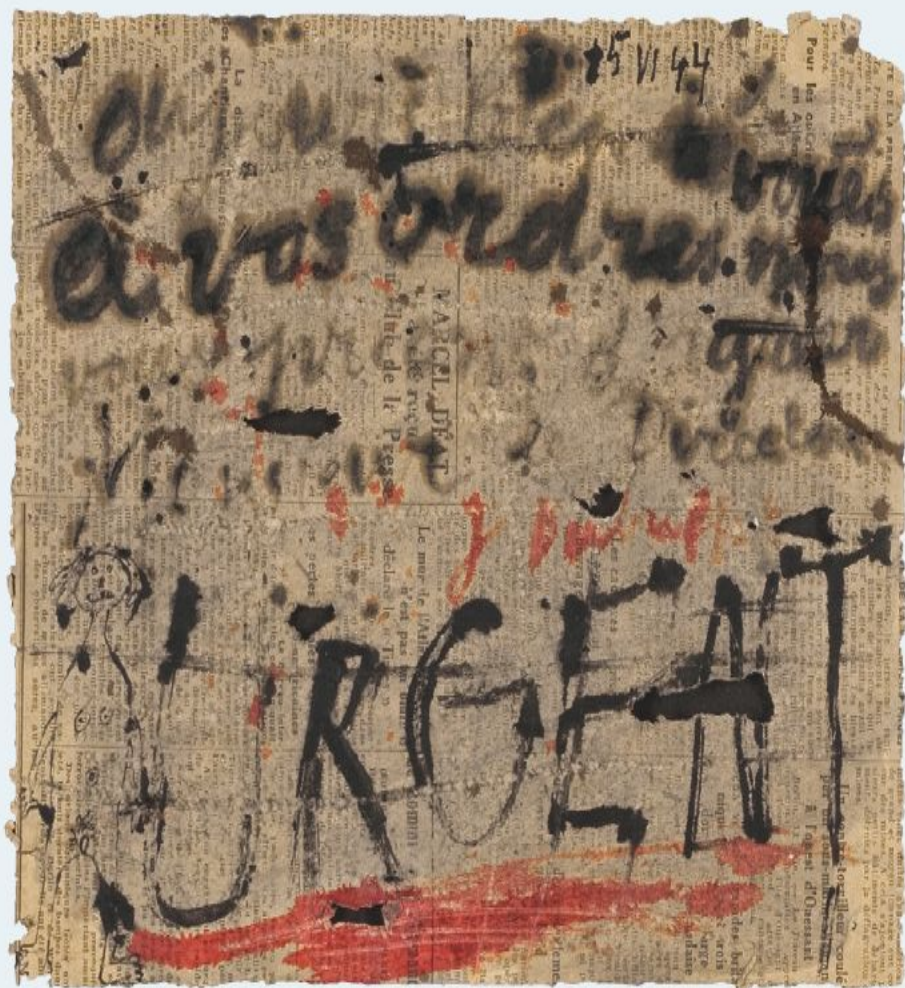
LARGE BLACK LANDSCAPE
(*GRAND PAYSAGE NOIR*), SEPTEMBER 1946





TOP: MESSAGE 'ÉMILE IS GONE AGAIN...'
(MESSAGE 'ÉMILE EST REPARTI...'), 17 JUNE 1944

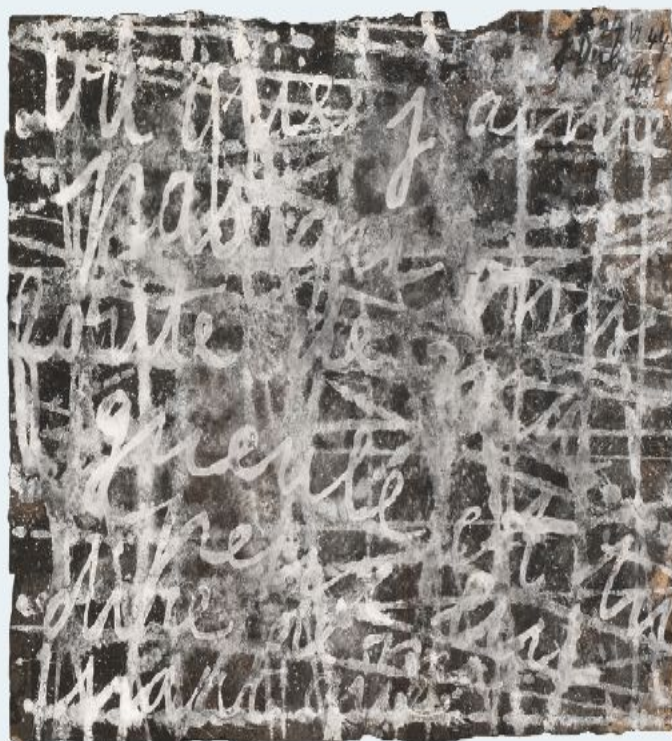
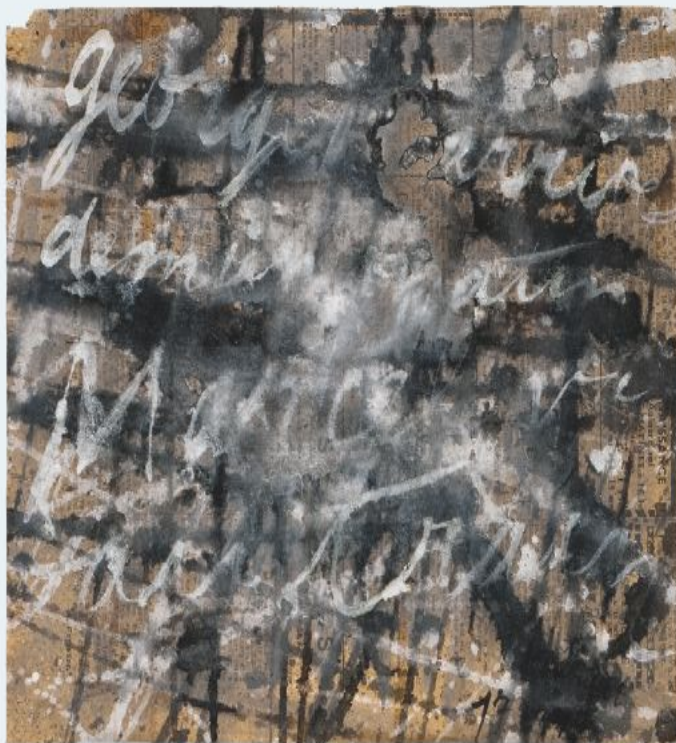
BOTTOM: MESSAGE 'LEDRU-ROLLIN, STATION EXIT...'
(MESSAGE 'LEDRU-ROLLIN, SORTIE DE MÉTRO...'), 25 JUNE 1944



MESSAGE 'ALWAYS DEDICATED TO YOUR ORDERS...'
(MESSAGE 'TOUJOURS BIEN DÉVOUÉS À VOS ORDRES...'), 25 JUNE 1944



MESSAGE 'I THINK ABOUT YOU...'
(MESSAGE 'JE PENSE À TOI...'), JUNE 1944



TOP: MESSAGE 'GEORGES ARRIVES TOMORROW MORNING...'
(MESSAGE 'GEORGES ARRIVE DEMAIN MATIN...'), 17 JUNE 1944

BOTTOM: MESSAGE 'SINCE I DON'T LIKE...'
(MESSAGE 'VU QUE J'AIME PAS...'), 27 JUNE 1944



PIANIST, PLATE 15 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(PIANISTE, PLANCHE 15 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 1944



TYPYST, PLATE 18 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(DACTYLOGRAPHE, PLANCHE 18 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 25 OCTOBER 1944



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BICYCLE TOURISM, PLATE 1 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(CYCLOTOURISME, PLANCHE 1 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 13 SEPTEMBER 1944



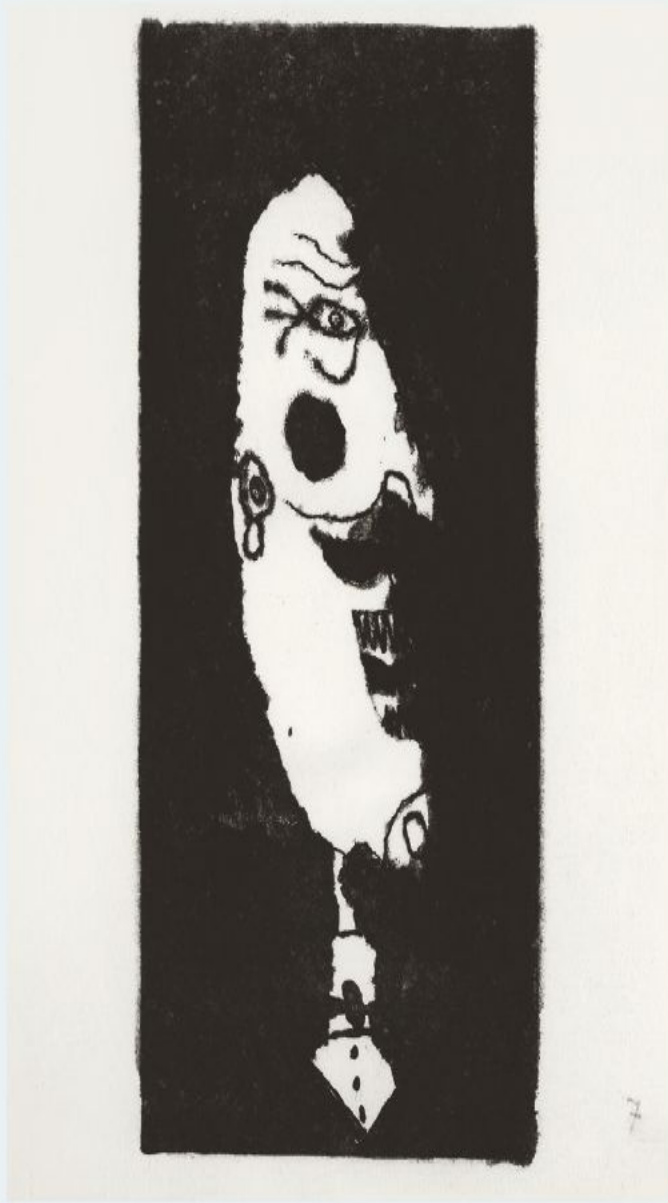
BIRD EATERS, PLATE 20 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(MANGEURS D'OISEAUX, PLANCHE 20 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 28 OCTOBER 1944



MATERNITY, PLATE 24 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(MATERNITE, PLANCHE 24 DE 'MATIERE ET MEMOIRE'), 1944



TELEPHONE TORMENT, PLATE 30 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(LE SUPPLICE DU TÉLÉPHONE, PLANCHE 30 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 1944



PROFILE OF A MOUSTACHED MAN, PLATE 7 FROM 'MATTER AND MEMORY'
(PROFLE D'HOMME MOUSTACHU, PLANCHE 7 DE 'MATIÈRE ET MÉMOIRE'), 1944



WALL WITH PARACHUTE, COVER OF THE ALBUM 'THE WALLS'
(MUR AU PARACHUTE, COUVERTURE DE L'ALBUM 'LES MURS'), JANUARY-MARCH 1945