

JEAN DUBUFFET: ANTICULTURAL POSITIONS
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An important change appears to be taking place in many minds within the field of art as well as so many other areas. Certain values long held to be definite and indisputable are now beginning to seem dubious if not completely false; others, formerly neglected or even despised, are now turning out to have great worth. This change is, no doubt, largely due to the knowledge we have been gaining during the past fifty years in regard to so-called primitive civilizations and their specific ways of thinking. Their art works have greatly disconcerted and engrossed the western public.

We are beginning to ask ourselves whether our Occident doesn't have something to learn from those savages. It could very well be that in various domains, their solutions and approaches, which have struck us as simplistic, are ultimately wiser than ours. It could very well be that we're the ones with simplistic attitudes. It could very well be that they rather than we are characterized by refinement, mental ability, and depth of mind.

I, personally, have a very high regard for the values of primitive peoples: instinct, passion, caprice, violence, madness. Nor do I feel that these values are in any way lacking in our western world. Quite the contrary! But the values celebrated by our culture do not strike me as corresponding to the true dynamics of our minds. Our culture is an ill-fitting coat--or at least one that no longer fits us. It's like a dead tongue that has nothing in common with the language now spoken in the street. It drifts further and further away from our daily life. It is confined to lifeless coteries, like a mandarin culture. It has no more living roots.

I aim at an art that is directly plugged in to our current life, an art that starts out from this current life that immediately emanates from our real life and our real moods.

I would like to enumerate certain points in our culture with which I disagree.

One of the chief traits of the western mind is its habit of ascribing to humankind a nature quite different from that of all other creatures, a refusal to identify our nature with, or compare it in any way whatsoever to, such elements as the wind, a tree, a stream--except in jest or in poetic figures. Western man despises trees and streams. He hates the very thought of being like them. The "primitive" however loves and admires trees and streams. He takes great pleasure in resembling them. He believes in an actual similitude between a human being, a tree, and a stream. He has a very strong sense of the continuity binding all things, especially humanity and the rest of the world. These "primitive"

societies certainly have a greater respect than western man for all the creatures on the earth. They do not see humankind as the lord of other creatures but merely as one of them.

Western man believes that his mind is capable of acquiring a perfect knowledge of things. He is convinced that the rest of the world keeps perfect step with his reasoning faculties. He strongly believes that the principles of his reason and especially those of his logic are well founded.

"Savages" feel that there is something weak about reason and logic, they rely on other ways of gaining knowledge of things.

This is why they so greatly esteem and admire those states of mind which we refer to as delirium. I must confess that I have a very keen interest in delirium. I am convinced that art has a great deal to do with delirium.

I would now like to speak about the western world's great respect for elaborated ideas. I do not regard elaborated ideas as the better part of the human function. They strike me as being a lesser degree of the mental processes, a level on which the mental mechanisms are impoverished, a kind of outer crust formed by cooling. Ideas are like steam that condenses into water upon touching the level of reason and logic.

I do not believe that the best part of mental functioning is to be found in ideas. The workings of the mind do not interest me on that level. My real aim is to capture thought at a developmental point prior to the stage of elaborated ideas.

All art, all literature, and all philosophy in the West operate on that level of elaborated ideas. My own art, my own philosophy, derive entirely from subjacent areas. I try to seize a mental motion at the greatest possible depth of its roots, where I am sure the sap is far richer.

Western culture dotes on analysis, but I have little taste for analysis, little confidence in it. People think that everything can be revealed by disassembling and dissecting all the parts and then studying each individual one.

My own impulse moves in the opposite direction. I am much more apt to treat wholes rather than parts. The moment an object is dismembered even in two, I feel that it's lost for my study, I feel further away from it rather than closer to it.

I believe very strongly that an inventory of parts does not render an account of the whole.

When I really want to view an object, I tend to look at it within the context of everything surrounding it. If I desire to know the pencil lying on my table, I focus my vision, not on the pencil but on the center of the room while trying to see as many objects as possible at once.

When I see a tree in the country, I don't transport it back to my laboratory to look at it through a microscope, because I feel that the wind blowing on the leaves is crucial to any knowledge of the tree and cannot be subtracted. The same holds for the birds in its branches, for the singing of these birds. My cast of mind is such that I always add more of what surrounds the tree and what surrounds the things that surround the tree.

I have dwelt on this point because I feel that this cast of mind is an important factor in my art.

The fifth point is the fact that our culture is based on complete trust in language (particularly written language) and on a belief in its capacity to translate and elaborate thought. Now this strikes me as a mistake. Language, I find, is a gross, extremely gross stenography, a system of highly rudimentary algebraic signs, damaging rather than serving thought. The spoken word, more concrete than writing, animated by the timbre and intonation of the voice, a bit of coughing, some grimaces, a whole range of mimicry, seems a lot more effective.

I consider written language a poor tool. As an instrument of communication, it conveys merely the carcass of a thought: what slag is to fire. And as an instrument of thought, it overloads the fluid and adulterates it.

I believe (and here I am in agreement with the so-called primitive civilizations) that painting, a medium more concrete than the written word, is a far richer instrument for communicating and elaborating thought.

I have said that what interests me about painting is not so much the moment at which it crystallizes into formal ideas as the preceding stages.

I want my painting to be seen as a tentative language fitted to these areas of thought.

I now come to my sixth and last point: I would like to talk about the western notion of beauty.

First I want to tell you how my conception differs from the usual viewpoint.

For most western people, there are objects that are beautiful and others that are ugly; there are beautiful people and ugly people, beautiful places and ugly ones.

But not for me, beauty does not enter into the picture for me. I consider the western notion of beauty completely erroneous. I absolutely refuse to accept the idea that there are ugly people and ugly objects. Such an idea strikes me as stifling and revolting.

I think it was the Greeks who invented the notion that some objects are more beautiful than others.

The so-called savages do not believe in this at all. They do not comprehend what you mean by beauty. This is precisely the reason why we call them savages. A name reserved for anyone who fails to understand that there are beautiful things and ugly things and doesn't really worry about it either.

The odd thing is that for centuries and centuries (and today more than ever) western man has been arguing over which things are beautiful and which are ugly. No one doubts for an instant that beauty exists, but you'll never find two people who agree on which objects are beautiful. The objects differ from one century to the next. In each new century, western culture proclaims as beautiful something that was proclaimed as ugly the century before.

The rationale given for this uncertainty is that beauty, while definitely existing, is hidden from the view of many people. The discernment of beauty would require a special sense with which many people are not endowed.

People also think that this sense can be developed through exercise and even instilled in people lacking it. Schools are set up for this purpose.

The teacher in such a school tells his pupils that there is definitely beauty in things, but he instantly has to add that there is disagreement on which things are endowed with it, and that we haven't as yet managed to establish which they are. He urges his pupils to examine the question themselves, and thus from one generation to the next the whole matter remains up in the air.

And yet this notion of beauty is one of the things to which our culture attaches so much value. It is customary to regard this faith in the existence of beauty and the cult devoted to beauty as the chief justification of western society. The very principle of civilization is inseparable from this notion of beauty.

I find this idea of beauty a meager and unintelligent invention. I find it mediocre and stirring. It's distressing to think about those people who are denied

beauty because their noses are crooked or because they are too fat or too old. The idea that our world is mostly made up of ugly objects and places while the beautiful objects and places are scarce and hard to find does not strike me as very exciting. I feel that if the West were to discard this idea, then good riddance! If we came to realize that any object in the world may fascinate and illuminate someone, we would be in much better shape. This idea would, I think, enrich our lives more than the Greek notion of beauty.

What will happen to art? For the Greeks, the goal of art was allegedly the invention of beautiful lines and beautiful color harmonies. If we abolish this notion, what's to become of art? Let me tell you. Art will then revert to its true function, a far more effective one than arranging shapes and colors for a supposed delight to the eyes.

The function of assembling colors in pleasing arrangements does not strike me as particularly noble. If this were all there was to painting, I wouldn't devote a single hour of my time to it.

Art addresses the mind and not the eyes. That is how it has always been regarded by "primitive" societies; and they are correct. Art is a language, an instrument of cognition and communication.

I think that our culture's enthusiasm for writing, which I mentioned earlier, has led us to view painting as a crude, rudimentary idiom good only for the illiterate. In order to allow art some kind of *raison d'être* we invented the myth of plastic beauty, which I feel is utter flimflam.

I have said and I repeat that in my opinion painting is a far richer language than the language of words. It is quite useless to seek any other *raison d'être* for art.

Painting is a far more immediate language than that of written words and at the same time it is charged with far more meaning. It operates with signs that are not abstract or incorporeal like words.

The signs in painting are much closer to the objects themselves. After that, painting manipulates subjects that are in themselves living substances. This is why it permits us to go much further than words can in approaching objects and their evocation.

Painting (and this is quite remarkable) can more or less evoke things at will, that is, with more or less presence, and at any degree between being and non-being.

Finally, painting can evoke things not in isolation but linked with everything surrounding them: a huge quantity of things simultaneously.

Furthermore, painting is a much more spontaneous and much more direct language than words: much closer to a shriek or to dancing. This is why painting is a means of expression for our inner voices and far more effective than words.

It lends itself, as I have said, much better than words to translating thought in its different stages, including the lowest levels (those on which thought is close to its birth), the underground levels of mental spurts.

Painting has a twofold advantage over language. First of all, it evokes objects more forcefully, it gets closer to them. Secondly, it opens wider gates to the inner dancing of the painter's mind. These two properties make painting a marvelous instrument for provoking thought--or, if you like, clairvoyance. And, it is also a marvelous instrument for exteriorizing this clairvoyance and permitting us to share it with the painter.

By utilizing these two powerful means, painting can illumine the world with magnificent discoveries. It can imbue man with new myths and new mystiques, to reveal the infinitely numerous un-divined aspects of things and values of which we were formerly unaware.

This, I think, is a much more engrossing task for artists than assemblages of shapes and colors to please the eyes.