

# ONE

## The Primacy of Matter: Art Brut and Modernism

In the primordial mud of existence, an exhumed doll, a miraculated body soaked with tears.

—*Michel Nedjar*

The sites of aesthetic discovery are as varied as our passions and our fears. The objects of our fascination, the raw matter of our arts, are sometimes familiar and reassuring, sometimes bizarre and uncanny. Sometimes such things lead us back to our childhood, sometimes forward to the moment of our death. On certain rare occasions, birth and death are conflated, and we are privy to the internal workings of the cosmos, revealing the very origins of our being.

In *Nadja* (1928), André Breton recounted that he would often go to the flea market at Saint-Ouen, just outside of Paris: “I go there often, searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse.”<sup>1</sup> These *objets trouvés* [found objects] are emblematic of the Surrealist aesthetic: manifestations of “objective chance,” they not only correspond to the dreams of the *flâneur* who discovers them, but they furthermore create reveries, that key feature of Surrealist poetics.

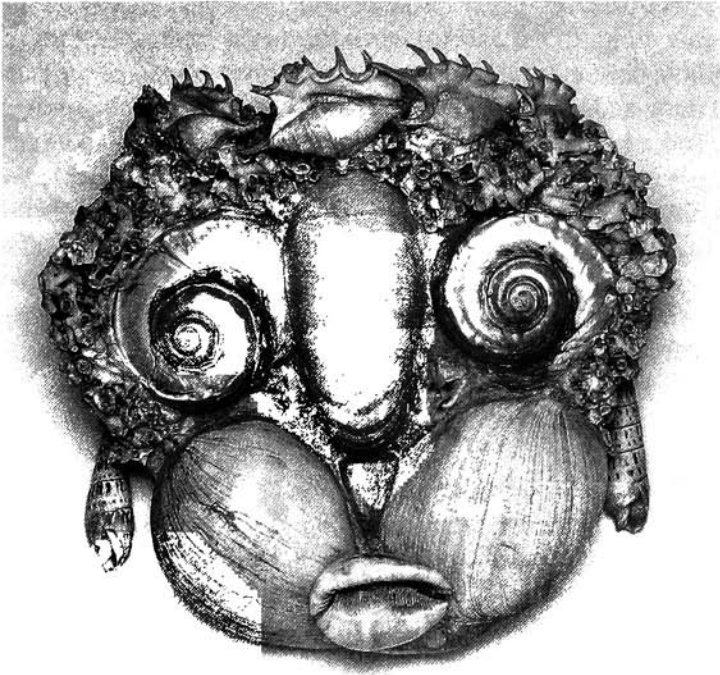
In the already standardized commercial culture of Paris in the 1920s, the flea market was the rare place where such found objects, whether *objets naturels* or *objets perturbés*, might still be discovered.

Once recycled in the context of the flea market, these objects—the refuse of history—are disposed in a sort of unorganized, unconscious collage, a mixture of epochs, places and styles where the centuries collide and exotic cultures infiltrate our own. The attraction, as Breton explained in *L'amour fou*, where he told of yet another trip to the same flea market in 1934, this time with Alberto Giacometti, is that of the *jamais vu* [the never seen], of the absolutely unique and unknown.<sup>2</sup> Such “oneiric” objects play the role of a poetic catalyst, where the structure of the imagination becomes a function of the aesthetic derealization of the everyday world, leading toward the re-creation of the cosmos as thoroughly marvelous.

Jean Dubuffet too frequented the flea markets of Paris, but for quite different purposes, albeit ultimately aesthetic ones. In his article “Saint-Ouen—Le Marché” [1944], he told of his fascination with this place. But rather than vaunt the rare, the unusual, the marvelous, his is a celebration of the commonplace, of “man settled into his presence, fully accessible, a radiously open mold [. . .] Man, oh my feast!”<sup>3</sup>

Briefly after founding *La compagnie de l'Art Brut*, dedicated to collecting those works of Art Brut (created by the insane, the eccentric, the isolated), which Dubuffet initially saw as stemming from the impulses of the common man, untainted by cultural conventions, Dubuffet took yet another trip to the flea market at Saint Ouen (June 1948). This time he went at the suggestion of André Breton (one of the charter members of the *compagnie*), to purchase some of Maisonneuve's masks that Breton had discovered there [figure 1]. Unlike for Breton, these voyages were not primarily inspired by the search for the unknown, but were rather motivated by the project of collecting objects of Art Brut—objects as marvelous as any that Breton had previously discovered. And yet, these trips would have another effect: it is precisely the banal textures and forms, objects and images of the everyday world that Dubuffet would ultimately recuperate into his own works of art, into his own aesthetic.

Dubuffet's radical attraction to pure, unadulterated, base matter is allegorically exemplified in a letter to his friend Jacques Berne: “I was enchanted by the crayfish, which pleased me greatly, and I thank you. It is a very rich food. Almost too rich. Too rich! I often tell Lili that her cooking is too rich—cream, butter, etc. I much prefer grass, or earth, which seems to me to be much more sumptuous. To eat earth, now there's a rich dish!”<sup>4</sup> He was equally explicit about the use of diverse



**Figure 1.** Pascal Maisonneuve, “The Eternal Infidel,” 1928 (photo courtesy the Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne).

*matières premières* on the aesthetic level: “It would greatly please me to use cow dung. In the Sahara, when the Arabs have something to putty or a hole to stop up, they use a paste formed by kneading dates with goat dung and a bit of sand. That’s an ingredient which greatly moves me, and which I fully expect to use one day.”<sup>5</sup> Here is an aesthetic desire working against itself, moving toward an antiaesthetic—or perhaps more accurately a counteraesthetic—procedure. In other words, Dubuffet proposes what amounts to a desublimatory aesthetic in opposition to the sublimatory exigencies of what he refers to as the *cultural arts*. (And these arts most certainly included Surrealism.) Such a desublimation is evident in his celebration of pure living matter itself.

This materiological, indeed scatological, aesthetic recalls the psychoanalytic understanding about the origins of the artwork. Lexical considerations are highly revelatory in this regard: we learn that *matter* signifies the “indeterminate ground of being,” the chaotic, unorganized stuff of existence; and by ellipsis, *matter* can signify *fecal matter*<sup>6</sup>—this latter lexical transformation, or euphemistic dissimulation, is an allegory for the process of sublimation itself. Psychoanalytic theory describes the complex set of unconscious symbolic relations whereby for the infant, the feces are equated with gift, child, and penis. Excrement—as pure formless matter, as pure body—functions as both good and bad object, as gift or weapon. Infantile play with the feces prefigures the artistic activity of sculptural production. In the process by which the infant is socialized, the first exclusion demanded of the individual body by the body politic is that of excrement: simultaneously the sign of our guilt (bad object, weapon, stain) and the sign of our power (good object, gift, magical talisman, artwork). Here, all nonproductive expenditure is abolished and dissimulated in the symbolic machine of cultural activity. This exclusion, this destruction of our primal sovereignty, is the very origin of sublimation. Excrement—as an image of death, as pure, formless, heterogeneous matter—is excluded from the symbolic order. All culture is the sublimation of this primal creative activity; and as anality is the mark of death, all sublimation is somehow the projection of the instinctual life of the repressed body into dead things, into cultural artifacts. Desublimation is achieved in those rare instances when adult social production takes the inverse route back toward the body, breaking the significative chain of quotidian existence by inaugurating a return of the repressed. In moving toward such dark,

asymbolic doubles, the long-repressed horror of death is revealed as the underside of the instincts, desires, and culture.<sup>7</sup>

We find the limits of scatological creativity in certain Art Brut creations of the mentally ill. Note the work of Georgine Hu (found in the museum L'Aracine), a patient in a psychiatric hospital just outside of Paris.<sup>8</sup> Her art consists of false banknotes created on toilet paper, with which she often attempted to pay her psychiatrist! Here, the scatological significance of money, the link between excrement and filthy lucre, is symbolized in a desublimated creativity, where the black humor and irony of the situation call into question both the economic and psychological aspects of creativity as well as all psychiatric endeavors. But it is not only in the art of the mentally ill that expression rediscovers its primal, scatological, corporeal component.

If Dubuffet's art was indeed influenced by those creations of Art Brut that he collected, it was more so in terms of the use of inhabitual materials and techniques than regarding formal innovations. Indeed, Dubuffet's entire artistic enterprise was more concerned with material than formal causes and effects. Michel Thévoz explained in his detailed study, *Dubuffet*, the contrast between the formal and material characteristics of art: "Matter, to the contrary, is the immediate, the unformed, the unnameable, what has neither identity nor determinations nor the civil status of Being. It does not lend itself to differentiation or to organization or to delimitation; or, what amounts to the same thing, it lends itself to all this much too complaisantly."<sup>9</sup> Dubuffet's varied series of works—*Texturologies*, *Topographies*, *Géographies*, *Matériologies*, *Pâtes Battues*—all exemplify his passion with raw matter by proffering pure textures without representational significance. But in fact, all of his work is a celebration of matter. Such "inspiration" by matter is the ultimate localization and particularization of the aesthetic object, hence the ultimate degree of antiinfluence. It is an aesthetic detotalization, where signifier and signified are perpetually conflated, and where artistic creativity is closest to its material, and thus cosmological, origins.

This opposition of matter to form—with pure matter as zero-degree form—leads directly to the problematic of the formless in art. This issue was already evident in modernist discourse, being at the core of the rupture in the Surrealist movement around 1930, especially in the polemic between André Breton and Georges Bataille.<sup>10</sup> Breton's po-

etic, idealized, sublimated mode of art was criticized by Bataille as being “pretentious idealist aberrations” and “nauseating utopian sentimentality.” In opposition to Breton’s dialectical idealism, Bataille proposed a sort of nondialectical materialism, a desublimatory heterology guided by sovereign wasteful expenditure, by transgression and excess. This position was implicitly an antiaesthetic, as exemplified by Bataille’s dictionary entry in the journal *Documents* for the word *informe* [formless], which ends with the claim: “affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.”<sup>11</sup>

Dubuffet too broke with Breton, in 1951, though for very different reasons than Bataille (related to the dissolution of the *Compagnie de l’Art Brut*); Dubuffet’s artistic position was also diametrically opposed to that of Breton. In that same epoch, Dubuffet spoke of his own work in terms of an *informisme*, *véhémentisme*, and *éclaboussurisme*,<sup>12</sup> and one of his earliest written texts, “Notes pour les fins-lettrés” [1946], begins with the subheading: “Partant de l’informe,”<sup>13</sup> where he argued that pure material itself is in fact already a language. Dubuffet also stressed the importance of chance as a function of the particularities of the materials employed in the artwork.<sup>14</sup> Whence the role of aberrations in the work of art: much later, Dubuffet would generalize these notions and claim that art itself is “a department of aberrations.”<sup>15</sup>

The tradition of discovery in the context of the flea market continues today in Paris, manifested in the life and works of the artist Michel Nedjar. But unlike Breton and Dubuffet, who were finally only visitors to that place, Nedjar is integrally involved in the flea market at Clignancourt. Nedjar’s maternal grandmother was a ragpicker [chiffonnière]; his father, a tailor; he himself was trained to be a tailor and designer, yet abandoned this profession to travel, discover himself, and create his art; finally earning his living by working in the flea market several days a week. In his own words:

My maternal grandmother used to buy up old clothes from middle-class homes. She would sell them at the Malik market. They were the *schmates*. The great times of the 50s. She was a ragpicker .

The *schmate* really was my granny. In her shop, she would bury herself in them, she had them all over her and all around her; it was her whole life. She was completely crazy about them, she lived on them: old rags. She would never throw out the slightest

scrap, or if anyone else did, she would go and recover it from the garbage bin, saying: "I'm sure I can get a price for this *schmate*."

It's grandmother for the fabrics and father for the needlework which pulls the pieces together. The ragpicker and the tailor: it's strange how I combined those two things, to give birth to a little creature. The dolls I make are really their child: the central point where my grandmother's and my father's energies flow together.<sup>16</sup>

We find here the biographical foundation of Nedjar's aesthetic, the very *matière première* of his art. The sources of his artistic material are both the flea market, where he found much of the rags that he transformed into art, and an even more primal source of waste material, garbage cans.

Continuity: because I never throw out any rags—that would be cruel—I risk being immersed altogether. Every week I bring them home from the flea market. The solution I've found is to transform them. A rebirth through my work with old rags.

For me, the garbage bin has something magical about it. It's so beautiful, the inside of a garbage bin, all those things gleaming up at you.<sup>17</sup>

Nedjar spoke of "the nostalgia of worn fabric," of the fact that, "the *schmate* is not an appearance; already it's closer to death, wearing out, old age. When it starts to glisten."<sup>18</sup> Beyond the collage aesthetic of the Cubists, beyond Duchamp's antiaesthetic of the "ready-made," beyond the found object aesthetic of the Surrealists, and beyond Dubuffet's radical celebration of a newly created "materiology," Nedjar's work, especially the dolls, entails the total resuscitation of waste material into the art object. [figures 2–6]. Yet this is an object that maintains its specific material and formal relations to the once abandoned rags, earth and waste matter of which it is made, all the while becoming a new sort of mythical, magical entity.

The title of one of Dubuffet's texts is, "Réhabilitation de la boue" (1946). If mud were ever "rehabilitated" in the history of art, it is in the work of Michel Nedjar:

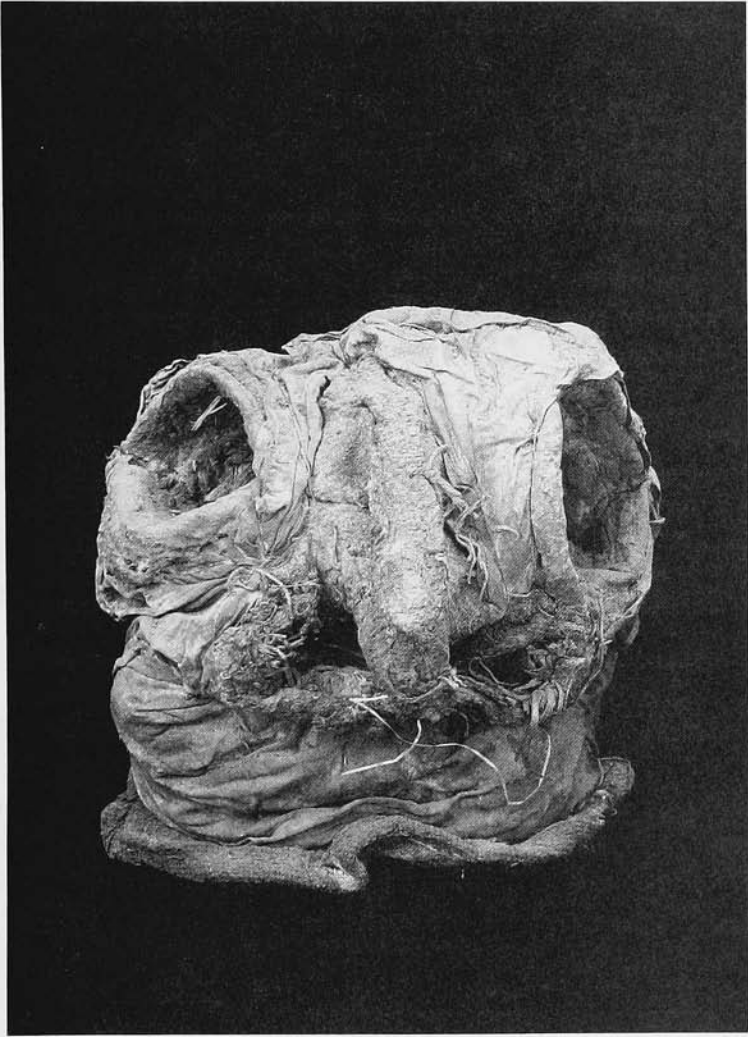
If I were to bury my dolls, it would be in order to dig them up again. The emotion of things decaying. Decaying material, the way the earth sets to work, the earth gnawing away, the mouldiness. The doll is transformed just as the body is undoubtedly transformed beneath the earth. For me, there is no frontier between



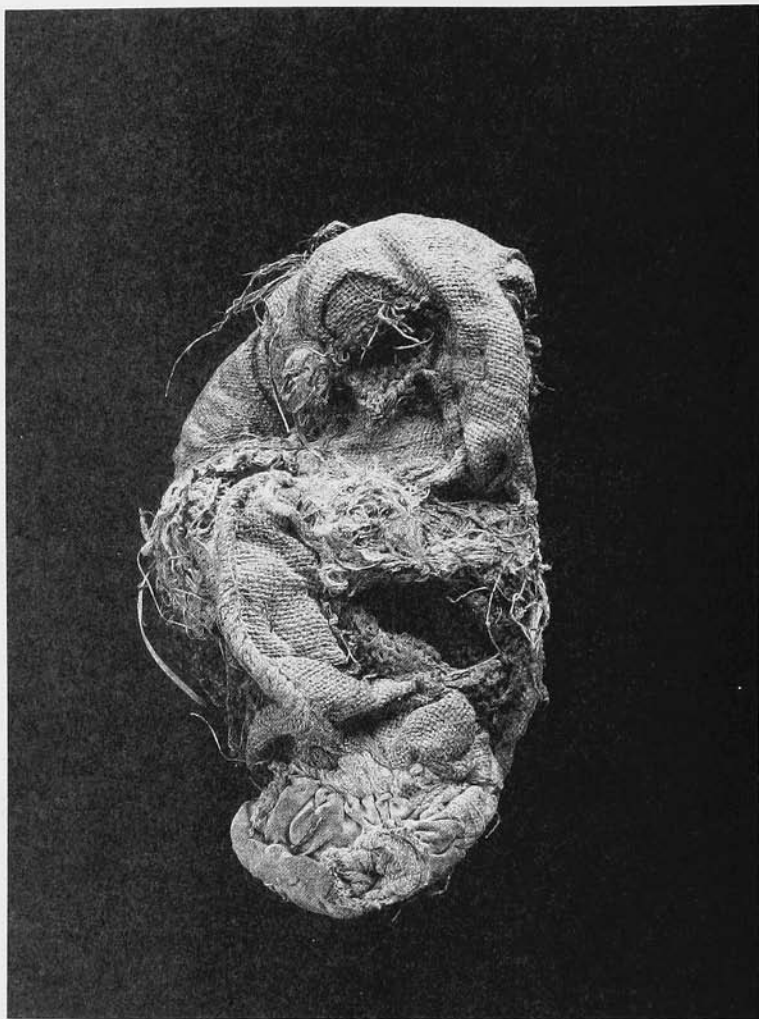


**Figure 2. Michel Nedjar, “Doll” (photo Béatrice Hatala, courtesy Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet).**

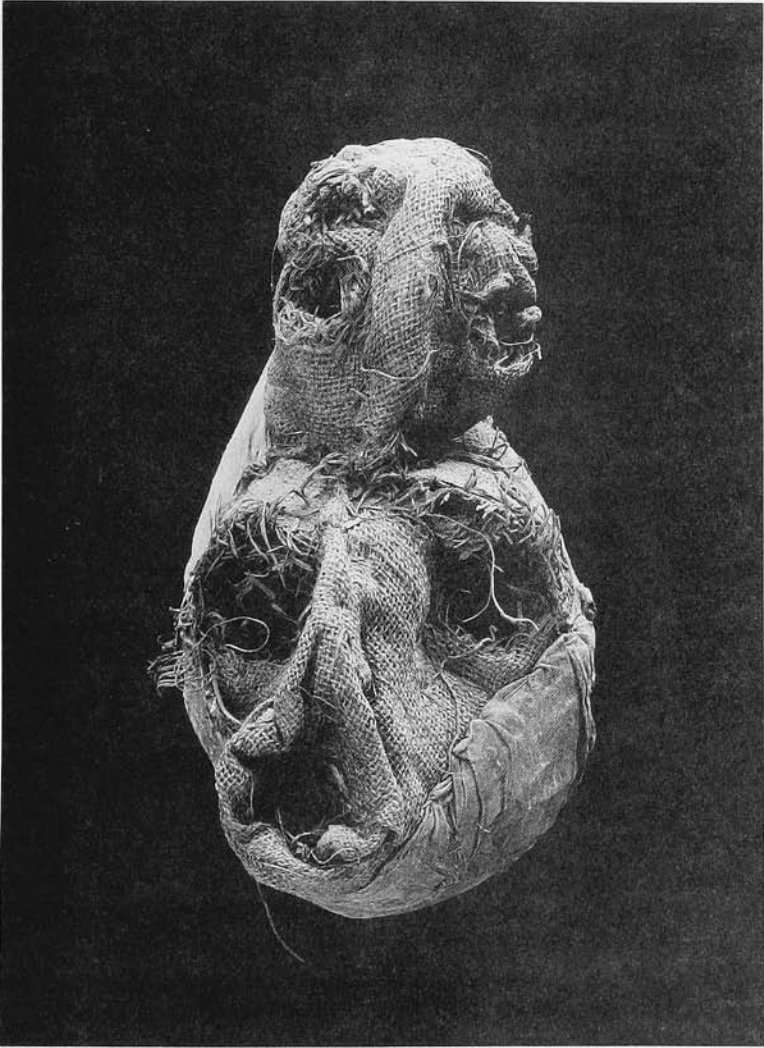




**Figure 3.** Michel Nedjar, "Mask" (photo Béatrice Hatala, courtesy Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet).



**Figure 4.** Michel Nedjar, “Mask” (photo Béatrice Hatala, courtesy Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet).



**Figure 5.** Michel Nedjar, “Mask” (photo Béatrice Hatala, courtesy Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet).



**Figure 6.** Michel Nedjar, “Animal” (photo David Boeno, courtesy Galerie Le Gall Peyroulet).

decay and its opposite. I need a full transformation. I use cold dyes. That's the effect which the earth would have produced, and it's the effect that I achieve by putting it on the fabrics. Because I touch; I make a dough. It resembles mud.<sup>19</sup>

For Nedjar, the *matière primaire* of his art is identified with terra firma, especially in its amorphous state of mud; literally, “la nostalgie de la boue.” Mud, shit, and blood: these are the sources of both life and art for Nedjar.

The dolls represent the beginning of the world: they are animal, stone, woman, man, the universe—the primeval fundamental material. That's an extraordinary experience. It was terrible and at the same time extraordinary. I covered my dolls over with soil and blood and it was a very powerful thing—I thought I was going mad.<sup>20</sup>

In short, as Nedjar claims: “What's dirty is alive.”<sup>21</sup> Or as Dubuffet insists: “Mud, refuse, and filth: these are man's lifelong companions. Shouldn't they be quite dear to him, and wouldn't it be doing him a favor to remind him of their beauty.”<sup>22</sup>

Thinking back to Bataille's choice of the spider to symbolize the unformed, we can understand in part why Michel Nedjar chose the spider as his personal symbol. (It appears as the “star” of one of his films, *A quoi rêve l'araignée?* [1981–1982]; a plastic spider is to be found among his collection of magic dolls [figure 7]; its image protects the entranceway to his apartment; and it adorns his letters and postcards in the form of a rubberstamped image.) As the symbol of the unformed at the root of all formations (i.e., the ugly, terrifying spider spinning the archetypal natural aesthetic form, its beautiful web), as the chaos at the core of the cosmos, the spider symbolizes primal matter and creativity, as well as ultimate death.

Yet the difference between Nedjar and Dubuffet are apparent: whereas for Dubuffet the celebration of matter is ultimately a pragmatic means of discovering new effects (be they aesthetic or antiaesthetic), for Nedjar matter has a magical, even mystical quality. Despite occasional superficial formal similarities, it would be more precise to say that Nedjar's relation to Dubuffet is to be found on deeper levels. First, both of their oeuvres instantiate the hyperbolic instance of the modernist quest for accentuating the materiality of the artwork. (Though every artist is somehow concerned with the materials at hand, most dissimulate the material base of the work in favor of its formal effects). Sec-



**Figure 7. The doll collection of Michel Nedjar (photo Pascal Martin).**

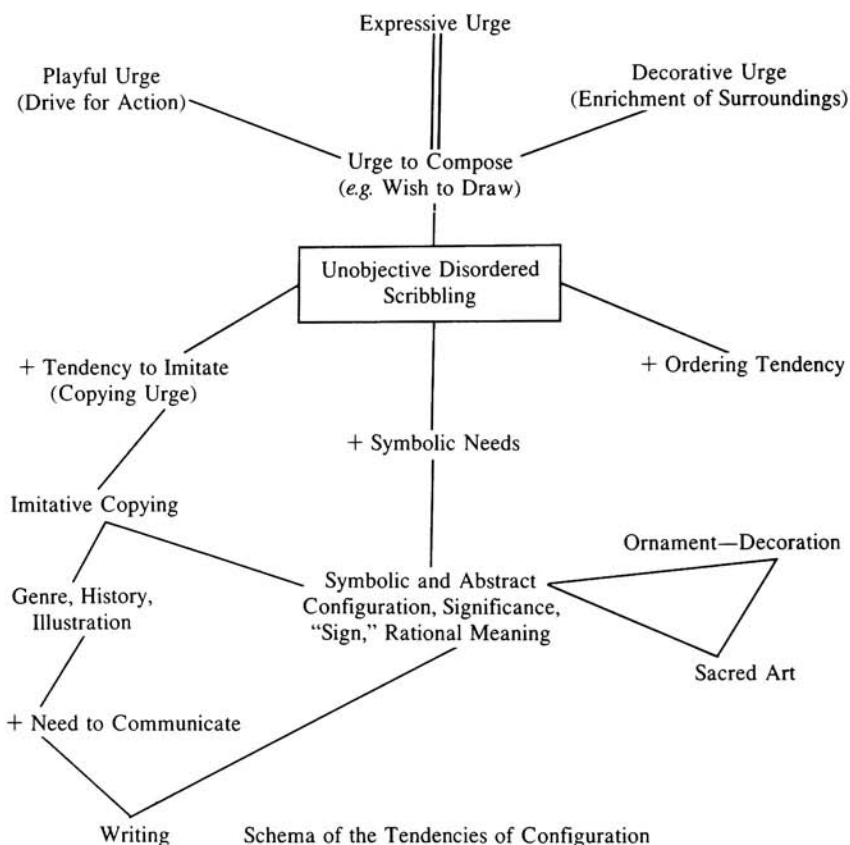
ond, it may be said that Dubuffet, who in fact chose Nedjar's dolls for inclusion in the *Collection de l'Art Brut* at Lausanne, was the first artist whose "tradition" was constituted by the heterogeneous nontradition of Art Brut. Michel Nedjar, who is a cofounder of *L'Aracine*, France's first museum of Art Brut, can also be said to have engaged Art Brut as his own tradition, once he discovered certain formal, material, and spiritual affinities between his own work and that of many Art Brut creators.

Yet this fascination with material is in fact directly related to the need for expression. Perhaps we may ascertain the very origins of art in the nexus of zero-degree matter and zero-degree expression. *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* is among the most influential studies of the art of the mentally ill, which by extention has also revealed the mainsprings of art in general, beyond the restricted realm of the psychopathology of expression. Here, Hans Prinzhorn described the crucial, central role of scribbling in the creative act. Scribbling is understood to be the key structural feature underlying the expressive gestalt of all artistic forms (see Figure 1.1).

These "unobjective disordered scribbblings" bear a chronological and structural primacy within expression: not yet a "language," such pure expressive traces are signs of corporeal activity, limited by the very nature of the materials at hand. (And we might add that, *mutatis mutandis*, this schema also pertains to the most basic sculptural activity.) A fundamental, preformal figuration of the psychic gestalt, their expressive efficacy is lost as soon as the world is thematized, as soon as the world is categorized and denominated through the mimetic formalization of objects. These figurations then become the prime formal features of the artwork, within representational schemes of resemblance and appearance. Thus, even if matter itself is a language as Dubuffet claimed, there is a primal moment of creativity at which we still cannot quite speak through it. Here, it is the body that "speaks"; here the troubled, awkward, undexterous gesture paradoxically manifests an adequate expression of the spirit.

Dubuffet—whose final series of works, *Mires* (1983–1984) and *Non-Lieux* (1984), were a return to scribbled forms—was always concerned with what Thévoz referred to as our "psychic prehistory": "The plane surface, the stroke that is repeated, the form that is drawn, are all foreign to the natural world. They are not constitutively





**Figure 1.1. Schema of the Tendencies of Configuration**

Source: Hans Prinzhorn, *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* [1922], English translation (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1968), p. 14.

devoted to mimetic representation; they only open up the symbolic register in its antefigurative polyvalence."<sup>23</sup> And as Dubuffet explains his own project:

My apparatus functions as a machine to abolish the names of things, to collapse the walls that the mind sets up between diverse objects, between diverse systems of objects, between the different registers of facts and of things and the different planes of thought; a machine to scramble the entire order instituted by the mind within the walls of phenomena, and to erase with a single stroke all

the paths traced out there; a machine to defeat all reason and to reinvest all things with equivocation and confusion.<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely these deformations stemming from expression—yet guided by the contingencies of matter—that effect a transformation of the aesthetic field. Dubuffet consciously puts these effects to work in constituting an antiaesthetic art, a contestation of the established modernist aesthetic domain. Yet this project remains sublimatory, even if only in the profoundly dialectical relation between cultural art and Dubuffet's antiart. To the contrary, Nedjar profited from a fascination with matter and the traces left by de-formative gestures to engender a desublimatory creation: anterior in time (his dolls harken back to the first playthings of childhood); regressive in matter (using the primordial mud, blood and excrement of mythopoeic creation, as well as working with his ancestral materials of rags); reclusive in space (secluded in his atelier, yet influenced by magical dolls from around the world; i.e., by arts whose formal aspects are ultimately subservient to their sacred potential).

In *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté*, Gaston Bachelard revealed the imaginary and symbolic relations between human creativity and the earth. In a chapter entitled "La pâte," he recounted a dream from Hans Carossa's book, *Une enfance*:

In a *nighttime dream*, recounted at length, the book's hero sees an uncle appear who tells him point-blank: "Are you there, master modeler?" And the uncle places "three pellets of a reddish white mixture" in the hand of the young dreamer, suggesting that he "make a beautiful child."

We should immediately understand that from the beginning of this oneiric story we are in the presence of the archetype of matter. These three pellets are really the primitive loam, the primal earth, the necessary and sufficient matter needed to "make a beautiful child." To create—in the strong sense of the word—is to create a child. In the dream, words often find their profound anthropomorphic sense. Besides, we should note that unconscious modeling is not of things, but of animals. A child, left to himself, makes a chicken or a rabbit. He creates life.

But the dream works quickly; the sleeping modeler soon ends his oneiric tale: "I worked and kneaded the dough for a while, and suddenly held in my hand a marvellously beautiful little man." The *kneaded homonculus* will no doubt incite facile psychoana-

lytic commentaries. But for us, as the rest of the tale will prove, it is here the sign of a profound aesthetic impulse.<sup>25</sup>

This tale might serve as an allegory for the creations of Michel Nedjar, works also born from a family drama, in the direct lineage of his father and maternal grandmother. Yet rather than learning to create by modeling, Nedjar needed to learn how to “unsew,” as he says, in order to produce his dolls.

In a totally different context, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in developing an ontology of the human body, explained that the body is “that strange object which uses its own parts as a general system of symbols for the world.”<sup>26</sup> This is a theory of sublimation. Conversely, we might say that for Michel Nedjar, the symbols and matter of the world are those strange entities that he used to form his specific representations, indeed deformations, of the human body—his dolls. This is a process, a poetics, of desublimation. And yet, their ultimate effect depends on whether we consider them to be merely art or something else, something closer to our own doubles, to the hidden side of our soul.