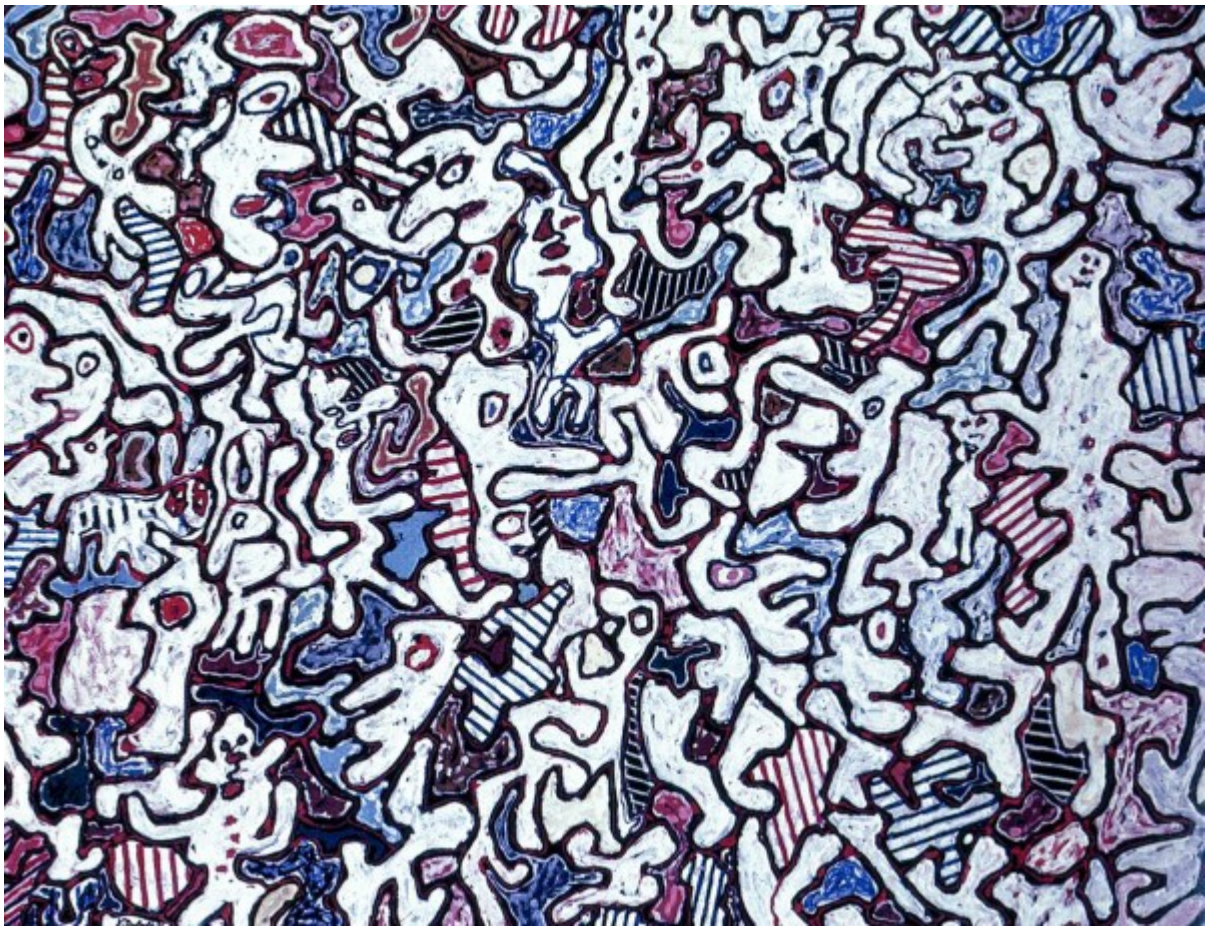
FORMLESS – DUBUFFET AND HYLOGRAPHY



Last year Paul Noble and I explored his remarkable world of Nobson New Town [Link]. Our conversation became [In Parenthesis] a kind of inventory or dictionary of topics in the way that form emerges in Paul's drawing [Link]

Here's one of my initial reactions [Link]:

In Nobson, buildings and structures give form to letters; things seem to be written in the architecture, in rocks and stones too, and they indeed are, though sense is evasive and easily slips away, leaving a kind

of anxious presence – they came and left. There are no living souls.

There are distinct experiences of order – fences, walls, arrangements of things. There are shrouded forms – dressed in cloth, tied and bound. And metamorphoses, monstrous hum-animals.

Then there's the omnipresence, quite Dionysian, of faecal matter, all over Paul's world. Garbage bags. Excrement. Waste matter? The Latin is *faex* – the sediment left in the wine cup, after downing the draft. Sediment? Sedimentary earth, clay – out of which Prometheus created humanity. The pencil graphite out of which emerges Nobson.

This is all causing me to reflect again upon an old fascination of mine – the emergence of a signal, sense or meaning from background noise, the distinction between figure and ground [Link]

I need a new word for all this –

hylography

If photography is writing with light, then hylography is writing with matter, on matter, through matter. Mark|matter in dialectic. As matter takes form it may reach a threshold of signification, when it seems to convey meaning. Hyle is Aristotle’s word for matter (and typically associated with morphe – form). Graphein is to write in Greek: the compound -graphy here denotes processes or styles of writing, drawing, or graphic representation – mediation and metamorphosis.

Hylography – [Link] – the emergence of sense out of matter.

Hylography is particularly about indexicality.

What’s an index? After Pierce –

An icon is a sign that is linked to its represented object by some shared quality. A drawing of a car may look like it.

A symbol represents its denoted object by virtue of an interpretive habit or rule that is independent of any shared physical quality or contextual relationship with that which it denotes. The written word and sound “stone” has no intrinsic relation to any actual stone or to the substance.

An index is a sign that is linked to its object by an actual connection or real relation (irrespectively of interpretation). A finger points; smoke billows and tells us there is fire.

Hylography interrupts these sign-object relationships. In particular hylography works on and with indexicality – a phenomenon far broader than language because it involves material connections. And performativity: the way something is said, done, written, can carry considerable significance and force, independent of the meaning or reference of what is said or written. [Link]

This weekend I was browsing again Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss's wonderful catalogue *Formless: a User's Guide* [Link] – almost a dictionary of this aspect of the archaeological imagination.

They take their mark from Georges Bataille (who haunts Nobson)

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would

have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.

“Formless” by Georges Bataille, Documents 1, Paris, 1929, p. 382 (translated by Allan Stoekl with Carl R Lovitt and Donald M Leslie Jr, in *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess Selected Writings 1927-1939*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press – page 31)

Tasks of words – giving shape, bringing things down.

Performance, performative gesture – putting a frock coat on things.

An energy field – potentiality –

Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has

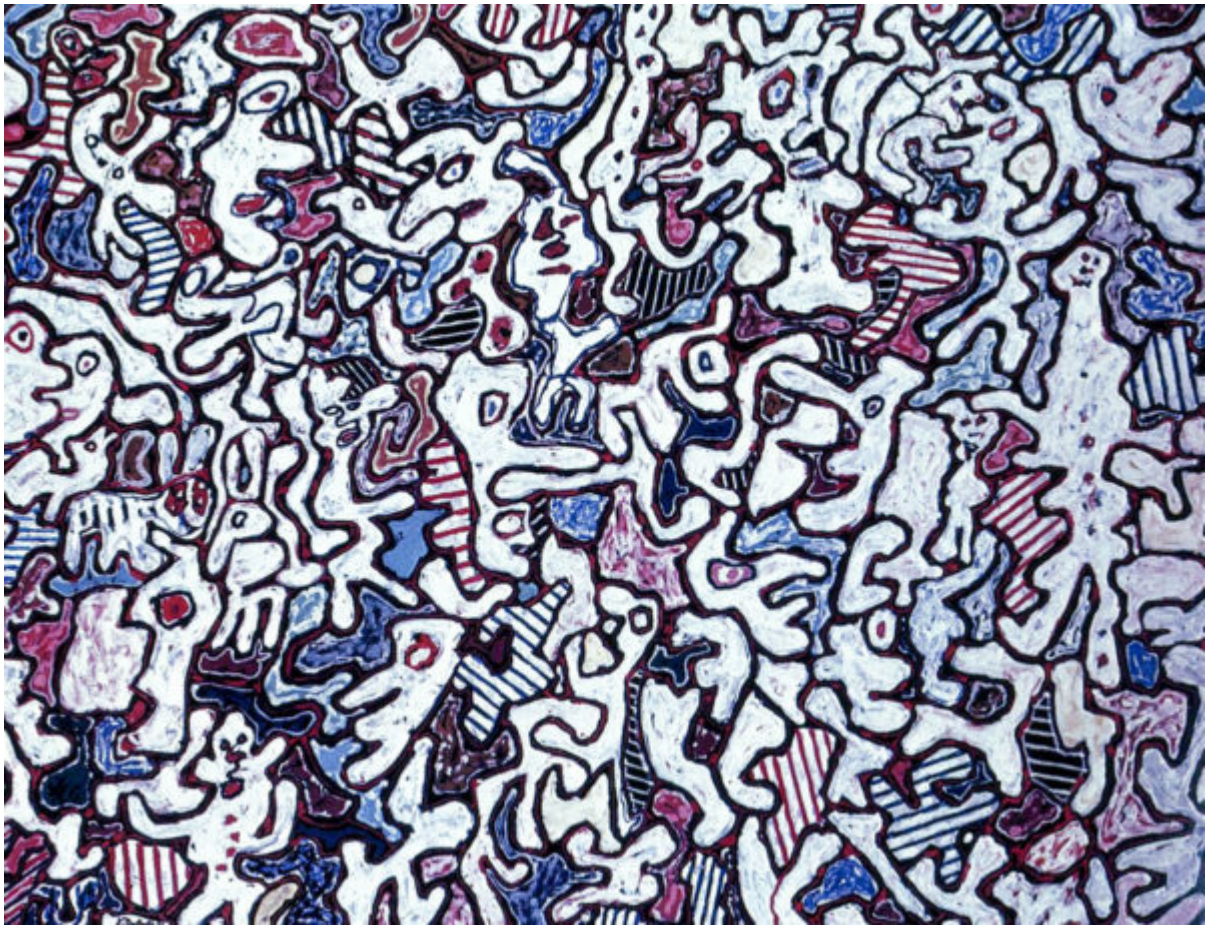
potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power.

Mary Douglas: Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, page 94

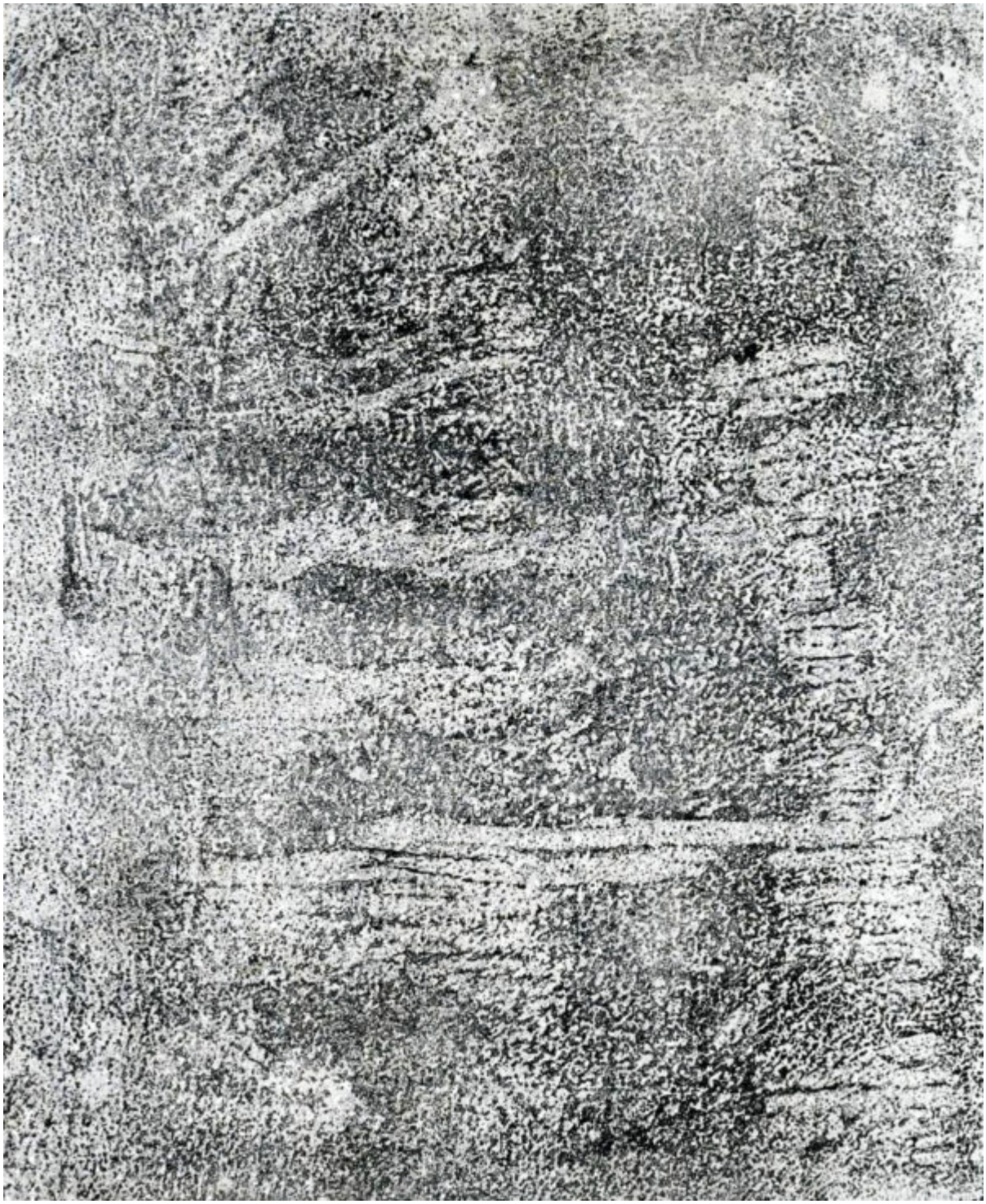
We find this energy in the works of Jean Dubuffet:

Scene on the earth – 1958 – lithograph

Tail Hair – 1962 – oil on canvas



Virtual virtue – 1963 – oil on canvas



Carelessness – 1961 – lithograph

La vie des sous-sols – 1951 – oil on canvas

Soul of the underground – 1959 – oil on aluminum foil on composition board

Peopling of the lands – 1953 – lithograph

Inhabited landscape – 1946 – lithograph

Dubuffet by Bill Brandt

Théâtre Des Errements III is an emblematic example of the early years of Jean Dubuffet's most celebrated artistic series: L'Hourloupe. In 1963, after twenty years as an established artist, Dubuffet published a small book consisting of a collection of ballpoint pen doodles made while the artist was casually on the telephone – not actively considering what he was drawing. The title of the book, L'Hourloupe, is a nonsensical French word "whose invention was based upon its sound. In French, these sounds suggest some wonderland or grotesque object or creature, while at the same time they evoke something rumbling and

threatening with tragic overtones. Both are implied." (the artist quoted in: "Remarks on the Unveiling of The Group of Four Trees, New York, October 24, 1972," Jean Dubuffet: A Retrospective, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1973) The work's spontaneous "wonderland" of lines and shapes, along with the plethora of (occasionally "tragic") contrasting colors, is the absolute embodiment of Dubuffet's initial concepts of his world-renowned Hourloupe series. Over the course of more than a decade, Dubuffet refined this artistic method into a pure and distinct mediation of abstraction and figuration that he believed could "dissolve the categories which our mind habitually employs to decipher the facts and spectacles of the world." Furthermore, he believed "the circulation of the mind from one object to another, from one category to another will be liberated and its mobility greatly increased." (bid, p. 26)

In regard to this freeing of the viewer's mind, Théâtre Des Errements III is such a significant piece among the Hourloupe series given the stimulating tension it creates by anxiously teetering on the brink of absolute cognizant liberty and utter frenzied confusion.

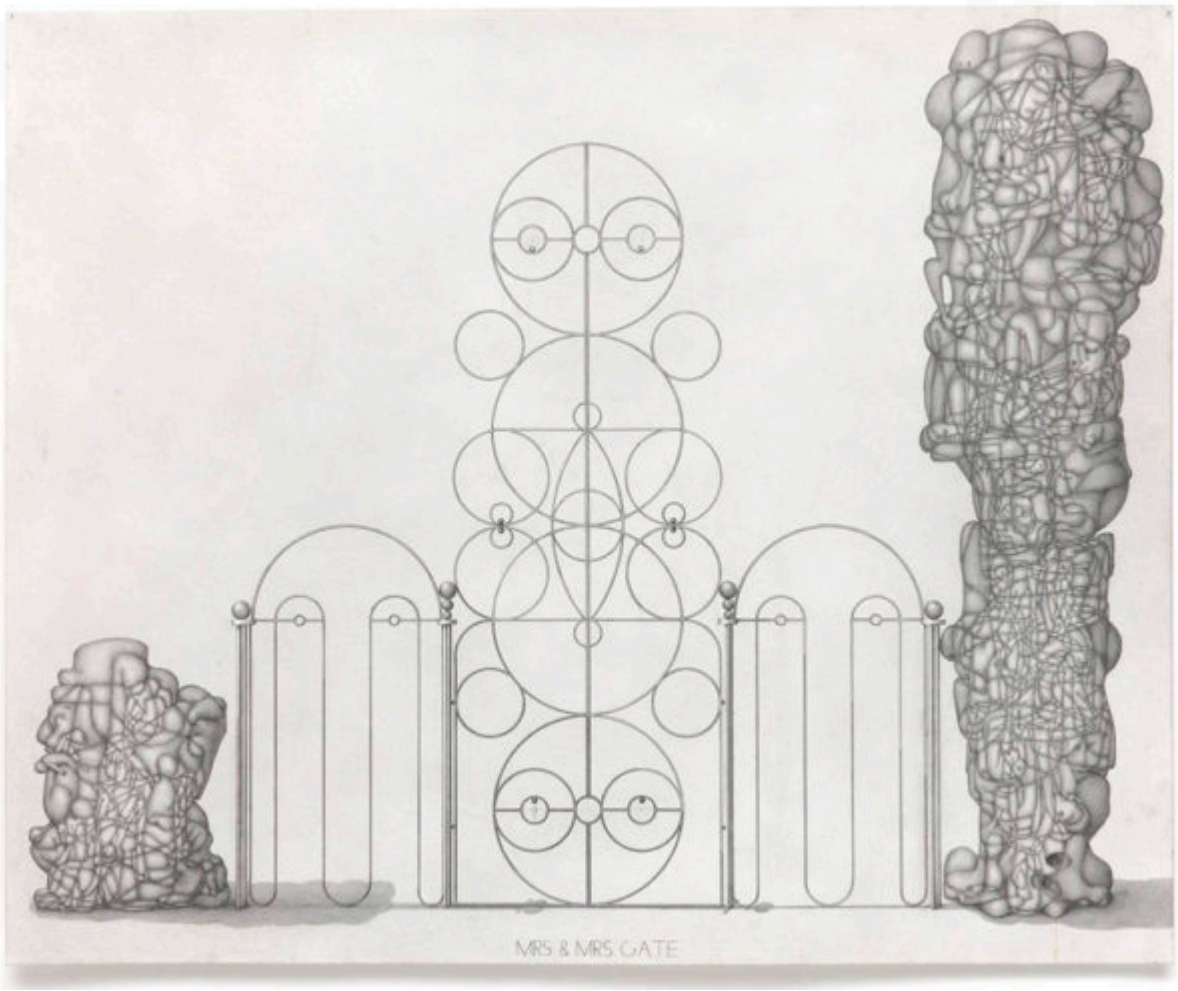
Executed free-hand and free-mind, the red and black snaking contours and the Breton-striped hatching forms a plethora of distorted composite figures and abstract puzzle pieces. The abstruse and hermetically impenetrable maze of organic yet deliberate shapes converges to create this “threatening” state that Dubuffet refers to in 1972. The frenetic density of Théâtre Des Errements III’s chaotic composition is heightened further by the flattened perspectival plane and its cropped, all-over format – a compositional device of Japanese woodblock prints employed by the Impressionist artists such as Monet and Degas, and ultimately embodied the raw and unfettered vision of Art Brut that informed Dubuffet’s entire oeuvre. Before the celebrated Hourloupe series, Dubuffet had combined a rejection of all classical notions of perspective with inspiration from various groups of outsiders – the insane, prisoners, children and the primitive – and an almost Fauvist use of colors as the basis for his visual language.

Bustling with energy, the jagged, impulsive lines that dart around the composition define the enthusiastic heartbeat and joie de vivre of Parisian existence that

Dubuffet had witnessed on his return to the French capital after a break of several years in the countryside at Vence. Unlike the familiar, regimented red-blue-white-black combination of Dubuffet's later Hourloupe works, Théâtre Des Errements III is rendered in a celebratory palette of bright hues, with both a refined simplicity and an unconscious spontaneity that oozes with vitality. The feverish lines and fickle hatching, along with expressive coloring, reiterate the fact that this is one of the ripest examples of Dubuffet's Hourloupe series. Six years after being painted, in a letter to Arnold Glimcher, Dubuffet refers to his "uninterrupted and resolutely uniform meandering script…[which] will thereby dissolve the categories which our mind habitually employs to decipher…the facts and spectacles of the world. Herewith the circulation of the mind from one object to another, from one category to another will be liberated and its mobility greatly increased." (the artist in a letter to Arnold Glimcher, 1969) Implicit in this evaluation is the notion of utter absorption, visually and psychically, within the painted surface, a sensation that is inescapable when confronting the present work and the essence of Théâtre Des Errements

III.

via Jean Dubuffet | Lot | Sotheby’s — art history offering exchange value for the art market.



Paul Noble — Mr and Mrs Gate — 2013 — pencil on paper