

named in "Le Gros orteil" (The Big Toe), perhaps the most strident example of alteration to which Bataille submits man (the text pronounces an axiom to which the definitive proof was only recently furnished by paleontology, namely, that "the big toe is the most *human* part of the human body"), but one can read this blazing firebrand as a Freudian pastiche: "Whatever the role played in the erection [the vertical position] by his foot, man, who has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud."²⁷ Freud would insist on the sublimatory function of repression in the formation of the ego; Bataille will drive in the nail of desublimation; there is nothing more human than this blob of spit that man despises; man . . . is this blob of spit. Whence, as well, the heuristic implication of human sacrifice, which does not differ all that much from the spectacle of the slaughterhouse: if one considers as secondary "the use of the sacrificial mechanism for various ends, such as propitiation or expiation," one is driven to retain "the elementary fact of the radical *alteration* of the person" and to see that "the victim struck down in a pool of blood, the torn-off finger, eye, or ear, do not appreciably differ from vomited food"—nor from the contemptible, bloody roll of hide in Lotar's photograph.²⁸ This alteration produces the *wholly other*, to wit, the sacred, according to the definition by Otto that Bataille would conserve all his life. But the sacred is only another name for what one rejects as excremental.

(See "Base Materialism," "Dialectic," and "*Jeu Lugubre*.")

B

Base Materialism

Yve-Alain Bois

In "La Valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade" (The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade), a text written in response to Breton's *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, Bataille would give his own enterprise (his "project against projects") the name "heterology." The text is not precisely dated, but it was most likely written at the same time or slightly after Bataille wrote his final articles for *Documents*, notably "La

Mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh" (Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh), where the term "heterogeneous" made its first appearance (auto-mutilation and sacrifice, among other actions, are qualified there as having "the power to liberate heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual").¹ The formulation of heterology thus coincided with the end of *Documents*, but one should not conclude from this that its practice was absent from the journal. On the contrary, in many respects *Documents* was the testing ground for heterology, and the cessation of its publication was synchronous with the fine-tuning of this notion. Of course, the fate of *Documents* was similar to that of other avant-garde magazines (the publisher, Georges Wildenstein, tiring of his plaything, got bored with paying for the broken crockery), but it is possible that Bataille himself forced the rupture. "L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions" (The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions), the last text he published there (in the same issue, and in the same vein as the essay "on" Van Gogh), signals in fact an admission of failure, the failure of art as heterogeneous radicality, which is to say, as nonassimilable: "The works of the greatest modern painters [Picasso?] belong if you will to the history of art, even perhaps to the most brilliant period of this history, but we should obviously feel sorry for someone who does not have a stock of infinitely more obsessional images to live off of." Or again: "We enter the art gallery as though into a pharmacy, looking for remedies nicely packaged for admissible illnesses."² Whatever its outrages, art is the prisoner of its ancient cathartic function and thus, despite everything, it remains an agent of social order: it is at the service of "homogeneity."

Heterology, Bataille writes, is the "science of what is entirely other." He specifies, "The term agiology would perhaps be more precise, but one would have to catch the double meaning of *agios* (analogous to the double meaning of *sacer*), soiled as well as *holy*. But it is above all the term scatology (the science of excrement) that retains in the present circumstances (the specialization of the sacred) an incontestable expressive value as the doublet of an abstract term such as *heterology*."³ Even though Bataille finally gave up the term "scatology," which he liked for its "concrete" aspect, as he said in a note, one should be careful about the way the sacred appears here: Bataille quickly realized that the "sacred" lends itself to confusion (because of its "specialization" in the "present context"). By "sacred" he means what is "wholly other," which is thus excluded as such, everything which is wholly other and treated as a foreign body: "The notion of the (heterogeneous) foreign body permits one to note the elementary subjective identity between

types of excrement (sperm, menstrual blood, urine, fecal matter) and everything that can be seen as sacred, divine, or marvelous."⁴ God is only sacred on the same basis as shit. Thus there is no connection whatever between Bataille's sense of the sacred and Breton's contemporaneous reappropriation of the marvelous. Bataille is clear about this in even the very first texts he published in *Documents*, before he had elaborated the idea of heterology: "The time has come, when employing the word *materialism*, to assign to it the meaning of a direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena, and not of a system founded on the fragmentary elements of an ideological analysis elaborated under the sign of religious ties."⁵

In *Documents*, materialism as Bataille understands it – *base materialism* – is the prefiguration of heterology. But heterology has the advantage of itself signaling rejection; while materialism must "exclude all idealism" (which is a far more complicated job than it might seem), "heterogeneity" designates from the outset what is excluded by idealism (by the *ego*, capitalism, organized religion, and so on). But above all, the term "heterology" has no philosophical antecedents with which it might be confused, while base materialism must measure itself against a long tradition (that is, the base materialist must struggle against what one would call "high" materialism). Everything splits into two, even materialism.

Base materialism (of which the *informe* is the most concrete manifestation) has the job of de-class(ify)ing, which is to say, simultaneously lowering and liberating from all ontological prisons, from any "devoir être" (role model). It is principally a matter of de-classing matter, of extracting it from the philosophical clutches of classical materialism, which is nothing but idealism in disguise: "Most materialists... have situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse types of facts, without realizing that in this way they have submitted to an obsession with an *ideal* form of matter, with a form that approaches closer than any other to that which matter *should be*."⁶ This "should be" is a mode of "homological" appropriation; it presupposes a standard or normative measure. On the contrary, the formless matter that base materialism claims for itself resembles nothing, especially not what it should be, refusing to let itself be assimilated to any concept whatever, to any abstraction whatever. For base materialism, nature produces only unique monsters: there are no deviants in nature because there is nothing but deviation.⁷ Ideas are prisons; the idea of "human nature" is the largest of the prisons: in "each man, an animal" is "locked up... like a convict."⁸

The question is where to find a support on which to construct this base materialism, "a materialism not implying an ontology, not

implying that matter is the thing-in-itself?" or, from whom to learn to submit one's being and one's reason "to what is *lower*, to what can never serve in any case to ape a given authority?" Certainly not from dialectical materialism, which had "as its starting point, at least as much as ontological materialism, absolute idealism in its Hegelian form." But from the Gnostics, for example, whose dualist philosophy, the Manichaean division of everything, represents one of the most ancient forms of the lowering sought by Bataille ("it was a question of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognized the helplessness of superior principles").⁹ Bataille also refers to a certain "present-day materialism." What is he thinking of? Of psychoanalysis, as the reader of *Documents* would have realized in the course of reading Bataille's article "Materialism," which had been published several months earlier in the journal's "critical dictionary": "Materialism can be seen as a senile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately founded upon psychological or social facts and not [*sic*] upon abstractions, such as artificially isolated physical phenomena. Thus it is from Freud... that a representation of matter must be taken."¹⁰

It is not possible to explore here, in detail, Bataille's completely idiosyncratic reading of Freud (but see, among other articles in this volume, "Abattoir," "*Jeu lugubre*," "Isotropy," and "Conclusion: The Destiny of the *Informe*"). However, it is significant to note that Bataille's reading is rigorously antithetical to Breton's, in large part because Bataille, unlike Breton, had actually undergone psychoanalysis (from 1925 to 1929), which played an important role in freeing him from writer's block. Thus, he knew "that it is not enough to *explain* to a neurotic the complexes that are controlling his unhealthy behavior, they must also be made *sensible*."¹¹ Freud saw the repression of the sexual drives (and the sublimation that follows from it) as the principal force operating in the formation of the ego, in human society in general, and in neurosis (which in this sense is opposed to psychosis). Bataille tries to think the reverse: Could one succeed in "reducing" repression without becoming crazy? A partial "lifting" is of course possible; such is perversion. But Bataille further asks: Can there be a perversion without symbolic "transposition"?¹²

"The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions," with which Bataille closes *Documents*, can be read as a commentary on Freud's essay "On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal Eroticism" (1917), in which Freud refines the ideas presented in one of his earlier texts, "Character and Anal Eroticism" (1908).¹³ In these articles Freud analyzes the famous symbolic transposition of excrement into gold and establishes the relation between retention

and defecation (or, in the vocabulary Bataille adopts at this point, between "appropriation" and "excretion"). In trying to get at the origin and development of a perversion, Freud was led down the path of base materialism (the need to be clean is a "transposition" of the desire to be dirty and covered with excrement; it is a "reaction formation" against the anal-erotic drive, as is avarice, for example). Bataille wants to push this even further; he wants to think that there could be a world without transposition. "The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions" is a condemnation of art (art is nothing but another layer of transposition, an illusion, a sublimation) and thus, to a certain extent, a condemnation of the two-year-long attempt carried on in *Documents* to link certain out-of-bounds artistic practices directly to ethnographic phenomena (which is to say, to social elements arising from supposedly less repressed cultures).¹⁴ But Bataille, alluding to fetishism, indicates what could be a nonsublimated relation to art: "I defy any collector whatever to love a painting as much as a fetishist loves a shoe."¹⁵ Shortly thereafter Bataille refused to consider the relation between gold and excrement as a simple displacement. In "La Notion de dépense" (The Notion of Expenditure), his major theoretical text of 1933, from which almost all of his later work developed, Bataille modifies the psychoanalytical interpretation of jewels: the jewel is associated with excrement not only by contrast; they share a condition of pure loss (the jewel is economic waste by definition). The jewel, shit, and the fetish are all on the level of sumptuary expenditure.¹⁶

Fetishism is a perverse form of symbolic transposition (for Freud, the fetish is an imaginary substitute for the absent maternal phallus). Furthermore, all consumption of art is at least in part fetishistic, but this is repressed (the exceptions are pathological and in recent years have tended toward a negative form of expression: the iconoclast's hatred that issues in slashing a Rembrandt or a Barnett Newman). Bataille was not advocating the spread of fetishistic behavior in the museum (we might wonder what he would have thought of the viewer who destroyed the original version of Eva Hesse's *Accession II* by climbing into it). But, in trying to think perversion as heterogeneous practice, he implicitly raised the question of what a fetishism without transposition would be. It is precisely this possibility that Michel Leiris saw in the work Giacometti was doing at the time of *Documents*:

Worshippers of those frail ghosts that are our moral, logical, and social imperatives, we thus attach ourselves to a transposed fetishism, the counterfeit of the one that deeply animates us, and this bad fetishism absorbs the largest part of our activity, leaving almost no place for true fetishism, the only kind that is really worthy, because altogether

self-conscious and therefore independent of any deception. In the world of art it is scarcely possible to find objects (sculptures or paintings) capable of responding in some way to the requirements of this true fetishism.¹⁷

This “fetishist” Giacometti was to have a brief career: after 1935 his work would definitively change character. At about the same moment (between 1926 and 1932) Picasso was also tempted by excremental nontransposition, but neither Bataille nor Leiris were aware of this (see “Figure” below). The banner would not be taken up by other artists until the postwar period; and there again, shackled as Bataille and Leiris were in relation to the visual arts by a figurative aesthetic much closer to that of surrealism than they were aware, neither had any way of paying the slightest attention to this phenomenon.

In fact, heterological fetishism put in its first reappearance after World War II in the form of an attack against the figure (an attack by means of concreteness, the absolute contrary to a rush toward the higher realms at the hands of abstraction: like abstraction, but also like metaphor or theme, the figure is a transposition). Beginning with a kind of kitsch and a practice of sculptural polychromy that were relatively tame at the outset of his career, Lucio Fontana arrived at the scatological around 1949. A comparison between two of his sculptures allows one to locate rather precisely the moment at which his work definitively tipped toward the low. Fontana's *Sculptura nera* (1947), whose original painted plaster version no longer exists, is a kind of crown made of balls of matter, vertically positioned like one of those flaming hoops that circus animals are forced to jump through. At the center a vaguely anthropomorphic, vertical excrescence emerges. The crown still bounds a space (frames it, gives it form), like a stage on which something is about to happen. This holdover of anthropomorphism and narrative is wholly voided in Fontana's *Ceramica spaziale* (1949) (figure 17), a mess of blackened matter – gleaming and iridescent, with an agitated surface – which seems to have fallen there on the ground like a massive turd. The general form is cubic, but this cube seems to have been chewed, ingested, and regurgitated. Geometry (form, the Platonic idea) is not suppressed but mapped onto what until then it had had the task of “suppressing by overcoming” (*aufheben*, to use the Hegelian verb): to wit, matter. No dialectical synthesis, but the simple interjection of an obscenity into the aesthetic house of cards. Although he would be most famous for his “slashed” monochrome canvases, where the iconoclastic gesture has been “transposed” into an inscription of an overly refined elegance, much of Fontana's later work – his sculpture, his pierced paint-

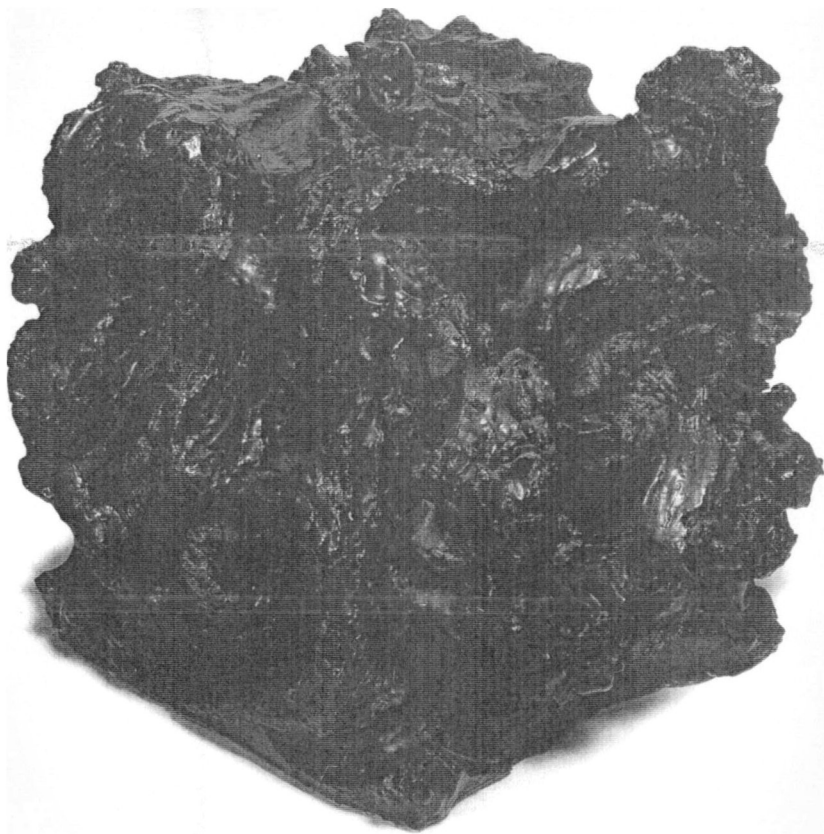


Figure 17.
Lucio Fontana,
Ceramica spaziale, 1949.
Polychrome ceramic,
23½ x 25¼ x 23½ inches.
Musée National d'Art
Moderne-CCI, Centre
Georges Pompidou, Paris.

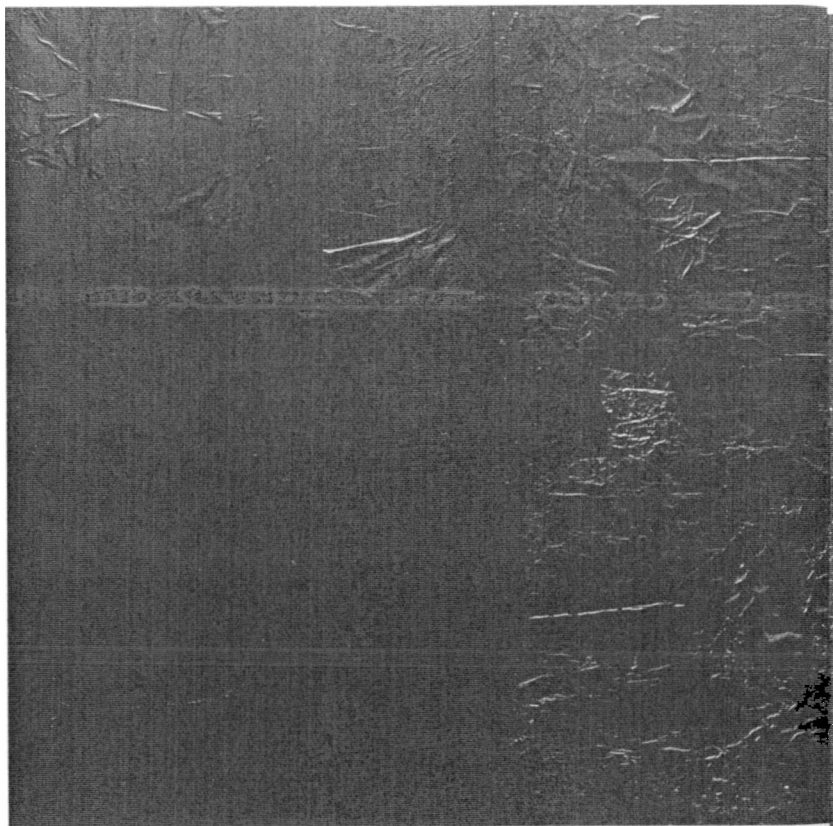
ings, his canvases gessoed with a repulsive icing before being punctured – shares a love for the excremental that puts them on the side of the “true fetishism” Leiris had spoken of.

At this time Fontana was the leader of a little movement (which included Alberto Burri and Piero Manzoni) in Italy. In the early 1950s, Burri, having briefly exploited a pauperist vein with his assemblages of burlap bags (an inevitable allusion to the many beggars who populated postwar Italy), began to burn his materials. With his attack on wooden siding, connotations of poverty continued to emerge (slums, makeshift shelters), but they evaporated at the beginning of the sixties once Burri turned to plastic, the very material of the “reconstruction” (its spread in Europe coincided with the Marshall Plan) but also the very type of nonassimilable waste (figure 5). Demolishing the myth of plastic as infinitely transposable substance, as alchemical miracle, by burning it, Burri presents it as “wholly other.”¹⁸ Burri did not retain this love of disgust as such for very long: the melted holes of his *Combustioni* soon turned into configurations whose sexual imagery was all too readable, and his work lost its interest after this overloaded metaphorization of the burn, signaling a replacement of “true fetishism” by “transposed fetishism.” Given this rather sorry about-face, it is likely that Burri was not fully aware of what he had achieved in his burned plastics and that the idea of using this material came to him from Piero Manzoni, a younger artist who worked as early as 1960–61 with rather repulsive (to the European sensibility of the time) industrial materials, such as polystyrofoam and fiberglass – not to mention fake fur.

Manzoni, bursting with frenetic activity (he died at thirty, yet left a very large oeuvre), had the luck to find himself an alter ego, an artist whom he soon felt he had to attack without mercy, namely, Yves Klein, whose own career was no less fleeting. Ambition played a large part in Manzoni’s ceaseless torpedoing of his rival (as in a Western, Manzoni seemed to be warning Klein that there was only room for one of them in the world), and Klein’s precisely stated, ultra-idealist aesthetic helped Manzoni position himself as Klein’s opposite. It was as though Manzoni were saying to Klein, “You want to exhibit gold; I will exhibit shit; you want to pump up the artistic ego with your monochromes and your immateriality; I will put the artist’s breath in red balloons that I will burst.” All Manzoni’s gestures, from his *Achromes* on (beginning with the very decision to purge color), are to be read as so many responses to Klein’s work. At first, in the *Achromes* covered with kaolin (white clay used for porcelain), one can only detect admiration, but from 1960 on, which is to say once industrial materials begin to be employed as such, the parodic animosity knows no limits.

In another context (beginning in 1951, several years before Klein even appeared on the scene), Robert Rauschenberg explored the materiological vein of the monochrome with his black paintings. Were these works conceived as an attack on Rauschenberg's revered professor at Black Mountain College, Josef Albers, and his passion for the "interaction of colors"? Or were they rather an attack on the abstract-expressionist gesture? Partly both no doubt, but even more perhaps the black paintings canceled the fascination for the void and for "dematerialization," both of which had motivated the white monochromes that Rauschenberg himself had made several months earlier. While the white paintings are matte and stripped of all texture (all the more since the artist would recoat them when they became dirty), the black paintings exude materiality. In the large polyptych of 1951 (figure 18), the only extant large-scale work from this first series, sheets of crumpled newspaper are drowned in the shiny enamel paint that covers the surface of the painting, giving the impression that it has been dipped in fresh tar. Sometimes the paint peels, notably in a somewhat later series (1952-53): the shiny black enamel tears off in shreds, revealing that its support is a mass of newspapers. No fragment is opposed to any other in these pictures, no side relates to another: there is no "structure," no figure, a minimum of composition, which was generally left to chance. The painting is a whole, like the fecal cube by Fontana, an undifferentiated piece of matter. In hindsight, Rauschenberg's *Gold Paintings* (1953) (figure 7), where gold leaf (and sometimes a bit of silver) covers sheets of newspaper and other detritus, seem to be a prescient critique of Yves Klein's *Monogolds*: rubbing shoulders with other paintings made of mud or other ignoble materials, verging on kitsch, they give the precious metal's excremental value back. Rauschenberg's paintings in dirt or dust (for example, the extraordinary *Dirt Painting* [1953] covered with mold) confirm the adage that Freud quotes in English (where does it come from?) in "Character and Anal Erotism": "Dirt is matter in the wrong place."¹⁹ From 1951 until his first *Combine Paintings* (1955), Rauschenberg's work is one big celebration of nondialectical, inarticulable waste.

A little later (but independently) Dubuffet would also make mud paintings and gold or silver paintings (the *Matériologies* from late 1959 and 1960 [figure 45], the least figurative of Dubuffet's works and thus, perhaps, the only ones within his entire oeuvre to approach the "true fetishism" at issue here). For a long time Dubuffet had wanted to find a means of "rehabilitating mud" (a command he had issued in 1946). Unlike Rauschenberg, however, he could not stop himself from "transposing" somewhat: his mud is fake (it is made of papier-mâché and mastic). His "rehabilitation" quickly became decorative, which was no accident (since rehab-



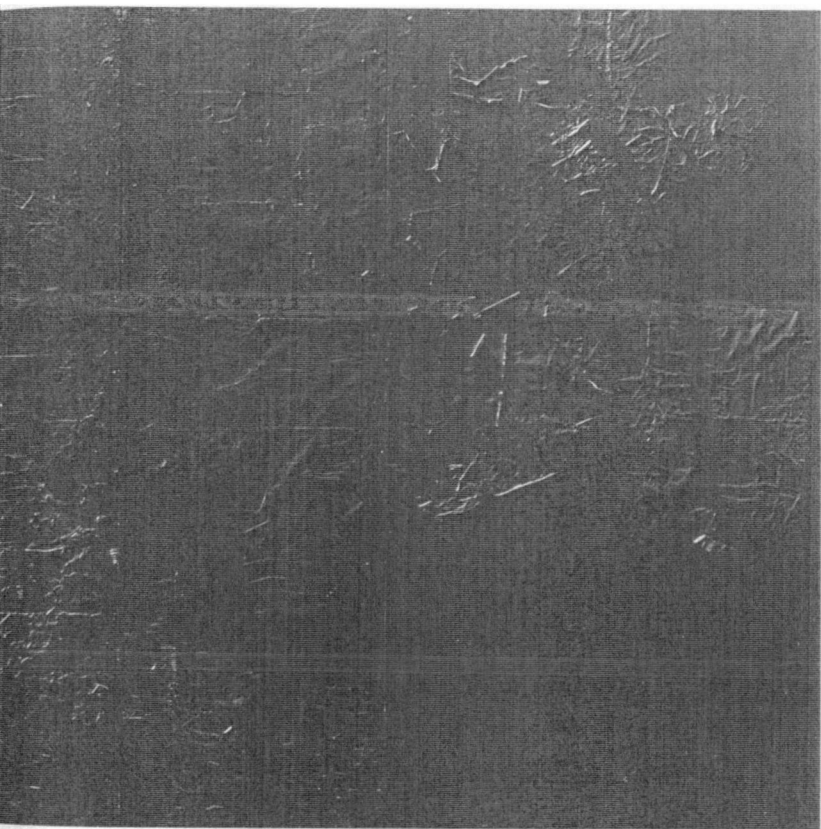


Figure 18
Robert Rauschenberg,
Untitled, 1951.
Oil and newspaper on
canvas, 18 x 171 inches
(4 panels).
© 1997 Robert
Rauschenberg / Licensed by
VAGA, New York.

itation is uplifting, not lowering). To hold onto the low as low is not an easy thing, and one could apply to Dubuffet a remark Leiris jotted in his diary when *Documents* was in full throttle: "At present, there is no means of making something pass as ugly or repulsive. Even shit is pretty."²⁰

Perhaps this is what Bernard Réquichot felt when he wrote to the dealer he and Dubuffet had in common: "How I would like to bring several mountains into the gallery. To serve as a backdrop for Dubuffet."²¹ To swallow up false mud by a mound of real mud, to muddy painting as such. In fact, if Dubuffet transformed mud into painting (a transposition in the direction of the high), Réquichot transformed painting into mud in his *Reliquaires*.²² In 1930, reviewing a show of collages (whose catalogue's preface was Louis Aragon's famous essay "Defiance to Painting"), Carl Einstein complained about the postcubist bastardization of collage, seeing it "in danger of sinking into the fakery of petit-bourgeois decoration."²³ He insults Aragon slightly, yet without reproaching him for having left the glue out of his discussion (it is "not an essential characteristic," the surrealist poet had written, "a pair of scissors and some paper, that is the only palette necessary"²⁴). Of all *Documents*'s regular contributors, Einstein was perhaps the least inclined to follow Bataille to the end, down the slope of base materialism (and it is wrong to try to assimilate their positions²⁴). It is thus hardly surprising that this suppression of glue – the gluey reverse side of the figure that sticks it to the paper, the way roots are a hidden aspect of the flower – escaped him. But it would be naive to believe that Bataille would have noticed it either: there again, the limitations of his figurative aesthetic would have prevented him. Réquichot retained from collage *nothing but* the glue, and after having just read and analyzed "The Big Toe," Roland Barthes wrote:

The fundamental form of repugnance is agglomeration; it is not gratuitously, for mere technical experimentation, that Réquichot turns to collage; his collages are not decorative, they do not juxtapose, they conglomerate, extending over huge surfaces, thickening into volumes; in a word, their truth is etymological, they take literally the *colle*, the glue at the origin of their name; what they produce is the glutinous, alimentary paste, luxuriant and nauseating, where outlining, cutting-out – i.e., nomination – are done away with.²⁵

(See "Abattoir," "Figure," "Isotropy," "Jeu Lugubre," and "Part Object.")