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OCTOBER

141

Asger Jorn
A Special Issue

Hal Foster — *Creaturely Cobra*

Karen Kurczynski — *No Man's Land*

Asger Jorn — *The Human Animal*

Wonder, Admiration, Enthusiasm

"Dear Friends"

Postscript to 12th-Century Stone Sculptures of Scania

Structuralism and Suppression

Nicola Pezolet — *Bauhaus Ideas: Jorn, Max Bill, and Reconstruction Culture*

Steven Harris — *How Language Looks*

Helle Brøns — *Masculine Resistance: Expressions and Experiences of Gender in the Work of Asger Jorn*

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Back cover: Asger Jorn. Poussin. *1962.*
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Introduction

This special issue devoted to the Danish artist Asger Jorn is a true collaboration: the contributors decided on its contents together, guided by the conviction that there is far more to know about this charismatic polymath than most students of the avant-garde can imagine. Critical reception of Jorn was prepared by Troels Andersen, Guy Atkins, Peter Shield, and Graham Birtwistle, and all who work on Jorn are indebted to their expertise. Yet this issue highlights a subsequent generation of Jorn scholars, who are concerned to position the artist in an expanded frame of references and relations.

Certainly one episode in the Jorn story—his involvement in the Situationist International—is familiar enough (it was analyzed by Claire Gilman in *October* 79 [Winter 1997]). Here, then, we focus on other aspects of his practice, such as the creaturely canvases of his Cobra period, his unexpected reinvention of history painting during the Cold War, his fierce polemic with Max Bill over the legacy of the Bauhaus, his pointed critique of structuralism as propounded by Lévi-Strauss, and his problematic relation to questions of gender. These new probes open up his manifold production; nevertheless, much work remains to be done. From his prewar days as a student of Léger and an assistant to Le Corbusier in Paris until his premature death in 1973 in Denmark, the restless Jorn was engaged in many of the radical developments in European art and politics of the past century. Walter Benjamin once feared that if he emigrated to the United States, he would be carted around with a sign that read "The Last European." Jorn, who was also skeptical of this country, might have felt similarly endangered.

The contributors are grateful to the Museum Jorn in Silkeborg, Denmark, for its archival assistance as well as its generous permission to publish images and texts by Jorn, and to the Novo Nordisk Foundation for its support of the translation of these writings (most of which were chosen for relevance to the topics taken up in the articles). I want to thank my fellow authors (especially Karen Kurczynski) for their expertise, as well as Niels Henriksen, whose work on another unfamiliar aspect of Jorn—his Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism—was a key prompt to this issue.

—Hal Foster

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Karel Appel. The Cry of Freedom. *1949.*

Creaturely Cobra

HAL FOSTER

In the aftermath of World War II, young artists in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam began to insist, at first separately and then together, on the necessity of a new approach to the brutal conditions of the time. They did so under the name "Cobra," an abbreviation of the names of the cities where they were based as well as a tribute to the snake they took up as an emblem. In Copenhagen a group of painters and sculptors had already formed around the magazine *Helhesten* (Hell horse), edited by the precocious Asger Jorn. Encouraged by the Copenhagen example, three young artists in Amsterdam—Constant Nieuwenhuys, Karel Appel, and Corneille—launched "the Experimental Group in Holland" in July 1948 with a magazine of their own called *Reflex*. Finally, in Brussels, where Surrealism lingered as a force, writers directed the scene, especially Christian Dotremont, who would soon edit the eponymous magazine of Cobra.

Jorn met Constant in the fall of 1946, and contacted Dotrement the next summer; by late 1948 the three were able to forge a coalition, which was as fragile as it was intense, lasting little more than three years. Despite ample evidence of the Stalin purges, the three refused to abandon Communism, and they insisted on dialectical materialism as essential to artistic experiment. They were linked, too, in their opposition to both functionalist and formalist positions, with Jorn reacting against his early training in Paris under Léger and Le Corbusier, and Constant turning against his Dutch forebears in De Stijl. At the same time, Jorn and Constant wanted to depart from Surrealism, aspects of which—a painterly automatism above all—they appropriated nonetheless. "By means of this irrational spontaneity," Jorn wrote in the first issue of *Cobra* with this automatist technique in mind, "we get closer to the vital source of life."[1]

Does the aim of "the vital source of life" make Cobra another belated Expressionism, one inflected by primitivism and Surrealism, or is there a distinctive program to be extracted from its different practices, a Cobra idea? Its concerns with the art of tribal peoples, children, and the mentally ill (which the Nazis had declared "degenerate" only a decade before) are familiar from prewar avant-gardes, and even its involvement with folk culture (Jorn in particular was fascinat-

1. Asger Jorn, "Discours aux pingouins," *Cobra* 1 (1949), p. 8.

OCTOBER 141, Summer 2012, pp. 4–21. *© 2012 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.*



Constant. Erotic Moment. *1949.*
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ed by Nordic myths, Viking monuments, medieval frescoes, rural churches, etc.) does not specify Cobra adequately. However, one attribute might distinguish it: its special penchant for the animal or, better, the creaturely. Such is the hypothesis I want to explore here.[2]

Consider *The Cry of Freedom* of 1949 by Appel. As often in his work, the painting presents a figure full in the canvas, barely contained by the cage of the frame and made up of a patchwork of hot reds, yellows, oranges, and pinks relieved only by swatches of cool blues and greens. The schematic head, its simple features blocked out in flat black, confronts us directly; the asymmetrical arms are deformed and useless (they resemble stubby wings wrapped around its body,

2. Jorn and company hardly invented this idiom. As Guy Atkins writes, "What is now regarded as the typically 'Cobra' inventory of forms: strange birds, beasts, wizards, masks, a general melee of zoomorphic and human shapes—such motifs had figured in the paintings of Egill Jacobsen and others since the late thirties" (*Jorn in Scandinavia 1930–1953* [London: Lund Humphries, 1968], p. 86). The Atkins volumes remain fundamental; I have also benefitted from Graham M. Birtwistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn's comprehensive theory of art between* Helhesten *and Cobra (1946–1949)* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986).

which they fail to protect); and the creature is propped up on three spindly legs. Neither human nor beast nor bird, it is all three: a newfangled beast whose "cry of freedom" seems to announce a damaged past as much as a transformed future—as if the famous *Angelus Novus* (1920), produced by Klee after World War I, were reborn, after World War II, as a mutant phoenix.[3]

Or consider *Erotic Moment* by Constant, a watercolor produced in 1949, the year of his polemic "It's Our Desire that Makes the Revolution," published in the fourth issue of *Cobra*. A lewd picture dominated by fecal browns, it seems to show two figures commingled sexually, in an eroticism that transforms discrete bodies into charged parts that are ecstatically exchanged. A wild-eyed creature raises its arms exultantly (one arm ends in a paw of three digits, the other begins as an obscene nose), while its partner, head thrown back, sticks a penile tongue into its mouth—even as this aggressive figure is also gendered female by the large vulva located at its center and the long wave of hair down its back. Although gender ambiguity is a staple in Duchamp, Giacometti, and others, the force of this confusion is entirely different here: not a frustrated search for the lost object of sexual desire à la Surrealism, but an unbridled expression of revolutionary passion à la Cobra.

How to understand such figures? A first clue can be found in a 1948 manifesto by Constant, who frames the postwar situation in dialectical terms as a "total collapse" that might permit a "new freedom," as long as artists "find their way back to the first point of origin of creative activity."[4] In this regard Constant champions the usual "expressions from the untaught" (again, the familiar trio of the primitive, the child, and the insane), but then refers enigmatically to postwar man as "a creature," and delivers this striking formula: "A painting is not a construction of colors and lines, but an animal, a night, a scream, a human being, or all of these."[5] Here Constant overturns the famous formalist formula of modernist painting presented sixty years before by Maurice Denis ("Remember that a painting—before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order"), and intimates that the creaturely is a cipher of the confused aftermath of the war—of a "broken down" condition in which "limitations . . . are dissolved."[6] Jorn rises to the challenge: "We must portray ourselves as human beasts," he writes Constant in a letter of 1950.[7]

In this light Cobra can be seen as an artistic intervention in the debate about humanism after the war, one that engaged the preeminent philosophers of the time, above all Sartre, who insisted that his existentialism was a humanism, and Heidegger, who dismissed both concepts as metaphysical.[8] For far too long,

3. The Klee-Cobra connection is explored in Michael Baumgartner et al., eds., *Klee and Cobra: A Child's Play* (Bern: Zentrum Paul Klee, 2011).
4. Constant, "Manifesto," *Reflex* 1, 1948; trans. in *Cobra 50 år*, ed. Anna Krogh and Holger Reenberg (Ishoj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 1997), p. 167.
5. Ibid., pp. 168, 171.
6. Ibid., p. 171. The Denis formula is from "Definition of Neotraditionism" (1890).
7. Part of the letter appears in facsimile in Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra: The Last Avant-Garde Movement of the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), p. 243.
8. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism" (1946), and Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" (1947), in which he responds to Sartre.

Heidegger argues, Western philosophy has defined the human in its difference from the animal (man possesses language, reason, and so on), and this "anthropological machine" has stripped the world of its fundamental alterity, made it all too human, that is, too subject to our instrumental abuse. At the same time Heidegger refuses any celebration of the animal as a counter-term; in a well-known formula he insists that whereas the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, while the human alone is world-making. And elsewhere he charges Rilke, in his great eighth Duino Elegy, with the gross misunderstanding that animals are closer to Being than man is.[9] If Heidegger had known Cobra, he would have condemned it on the same grounds, for it too values the animal as immediately connected to "the vital source of life": the untamed expression in *The Cry of Freedom*, the primal ecstasy in *Erotic Moment*, the powerful symbol of the coiled cobra, all proclaim as much.

Yet this becoming-animal of the human in Cobra is no simple recovery of a lost nature, for it also attests to the denaturalization produced by the war and the Holocaust. Cobra creatures sometimes signify this irredeemable anguish, which is felt everywhere in Jorn. For example, *Wounded Beast II* (1951) is another misshapen bird from the Cobra menagerie, also painted full in the frame and pressed close to the picture plane. With a large head atop a little body, it appears in profile under a black sun, its whiskered beak haggard, its yellow eye crazed, its feathers limp like so many flaps of dead-blue flesh. This is not the only painting in which Jorn turns the eagle, the emblem of state par excellence, into a terror-struck bird of prey; in this version, however, it is the world at large that appears wounded. Here Jorn answers Constant's call for a painting as "an animal, a night, a scream, a human being, or all of these"; indeed, this definition (if anything so anti-formal can be called a definition) speaks to his Cobra practice in general.

Jorn often frames his work of this period in an Expressionist way, that is, as an attempt to reclaim a primal unity, both natural and communal, before psychic repression and social division. And in the conventional manner of the Freudo-Marxism of the time he associates this fall from unity with bourgeois class culture. Yet his Cobra painting is not Expressionist—his gestures already suggest a futility as such—and his philosophy, a patchwork creature of its own, is anything but conventional.[10] The bad object of this philosophy is monolithic enough: "the classical tradition," by which Jorn means all European culture given over to Apollonian form (here he follows the familiar Nietzschean opposition in *The Birth of Tragedy*).

9. See Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1995), p. 185; and *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1992), pp. 150–60. These reflections were first given as lectures in 1929–30 and 1942–42, respectively. Also see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University, 2004), pp. 49–62; the phrase "anthropological machine" is his.

10. His Situationist painting of the late 1950s and early '60s, Karen Kurczynski writes, "demonstrates an explicit irony in relation to the painterly gesture," with its "direct parody in the form of caricature or vandalism." See her "Ironic Gestures: Asger Jorn, Informel, and Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2007), pp. 110, 113.

Yet his good object is multiple: though he sometimes calls it "Dionysian rhythm," he is just as likely to associate it with primitive art or folk culture, Taoist philosophy or dialectical materialism, and so on. First and last, however, Jorn advocates any expression that advances materialist vitality over idealist fixity. In this regard he acts in the name of Scandinavian culture above all: in his view the Scandinavian is the great other to the classical, at once marginal to it and subversive of it; in particular he champions the pagan vernacular of the North in opposition to the official Christianity of the South imported by the nobility. It is this commitment that drives not only his Cobra practice, both visual and textual, but also his project to reclaim the idea of the Nordic from its racist abuse by the Nazis. This project includes his plan of 28 volumes devoted to "10,000 Years of Nordic Art," only six of which were completed (and only one in his lifetime). It also involves his founding of the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism; the Vandal, especially the Viking, is his great anticlassical hero.[11]

It is this passionate anticlassicism that accounts for the apparent ugliness of his art, which Jorn pits, with great delight, against classical beauty. Already in a 1947 text titled "Apollo or Dionysius" Jorn proposes Dionysian rhythm as a counter to Apollonian form in such a way that the Apollonian is not only underwritten by the Dionysian but also undone by it, a line of thought that follows directly on Nietzsche, for whom Apollo is "the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*" and Dionysus its "shattering." If "individuation is the root of all evil" for the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, so too is it for Jorn.[12] This is evident not only in his philosophy—his critique of all bourgeois distinctions in society and culture and his advocacy of all collective forms of art—but also in his painting, where he often stages his own modernist deconstruction of figure and ground, the "principle of individuation" in image-making.

In fact, all his Cobra production is a concerted attack on classical aesthetics. Well before his Situationist reworkings of found flea-market paintings known as "modifications" and "disfigurations," Jorn practices a programmatic deformation of the classical tableau, and he does so primarily through the creaturely. What I mean by the classical tableau is simple enough. "A well-composed tableau is a whole contained under a single point of view," Diderot writes in his essay on composition for his *Encyclopédie* (1751–72),

> in which the parts work together to one end, and form by their mutual correspondence a unity as real as that of the members of the body of an animal; so that a piece of painting made up of a large number of fig-

11. Jorn was especially taken by Didrik the Knight, a legendary figure of Scandinavian strength who derives from Theodirich, the king of the Visigoths in the early sixth century (Jorn devoted his last publication project to Didrik). Already with *Helhesten*, the name of which was taken from the three-legged beast of death in the Eddas, Jorn and company moved to reclaim Nordic mythology from the Nazis.

12. Frederich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 22, 67. "Apollo embodies the transcendent genius of the *principium individuationis*; through him alone is it possible to achieve redemption in illusion. The mystical jubilation of Dionysius, on the other hand, breaks the spell of individuation and opens a path to the maternal womb of being" (p. 97).



Jorn. The Moon and the Animals. *1950.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

> ures thrown at random on to the canvas, with neither proportion, intelligence nor unity, no more deserves to be called a *true composition* than scattered studies of legs, nose and eyes on the same cartoon deserve to be called a *portrait* or even a *human figure.*[13]

It is against this idealist model of the integrated painting (which, significantly here, turns on the analogy of "the body of an animal") that Jorn poses his materialist pictures of disruptive creatures.

Two points should be stressed right away. First, this critique is not about a lack of skill: schooled in composition under Léger, Jorn performs a calculated deskilling of the tableau, to which end he puts his own brand of painterly automatism. Like his Danish predecessors Egill Jacobsen and Richard Mortensen, Jorn releases color from drawing, and his liberated palette favors Nordic obscurity over Mediterranean clarity.[14] In general, Jorn paints a sublunary world of nocturnal creatures, as in *The Moon and the Animals* (1950); sometimes, too, as in *Wounded Beast II,* he places his formless figures under a cold sun. This is to advance another basic confusion, of day and night, and another *détournement* of the classical, here of its (Apollonian) heliotropism. Second, this critique is not a nihilistic attack: Jorn launches it largely from within the tableau format, for only there can it be truly incisive. This is to say that as much as he challenges the tableau tradition, he is also invested in it: "The future is made through relinquishing or sacrificing the past," Jorn writes in a celebrated text titled "Detourned Painting" (1959). "I want to reju-

13. Diderot as quoted by Roland Barthes in "Diderot, Eisenstein, Brecht," in *Image–Music–Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 71.
14. Jorn writes that Jacobsen and Mortensen "provoked a salutary crisis...the downfall of drawing in favor of color, triumphant, effulgent." See *Lettres à plus jeune* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 1998), p. 89.

venate European culture. I begin with art. Our past is full of becoming. One needs only to crack open the shells."[15] In short, already at the moment of Cobra his goal is *détournement*, not destruction. And yet this *détournement* is a thorough one, involving most of the classical criteria noted by Diderot: single point of view, pictorial integration, "true composition," and so on. It also targets most of the academic genres of traditional painting.



Jorn. Shameful Pastoral. *1952.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

The creaturely disruption of landscape painting is already announced—in composition, color, and title—in *Obtrusive Creatures Whose Right to Exist Is Proved by Their Existence* (1939–40), in which Jorn attempts to turn the idioms of Picasso and Miró to his own ends. Yet this subversion is more radical, more original, a decade later in *Shameful Pastoral* (1952), where any ordering of space is undone by the amorphous animals that have taken over the landscape. Various homunculi and monsters, most painted with the pink of human flesh and all given too many heads, legs, or wings, enact the "shameful pastoral" of the title in a way that indicates the final rotting of this classical ideal of rural life. Traditionally the pastoral designates a scene in which common folk serve as foils for elevated subjects, but here there is only a mixed condition, a commingling of perverse hybrids.[16]

15. Jorn, "Peinture détournée," in *Vingt peintures modifiées par Asger Jorn* (Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche, 1959), n.p. Jorn continues: "Painting is over. You might as well finish it off. Detourn. Long live painting." In his view, then, does painting, like the king, have two bodies, only one of which is mortal?

16. The Christian meaning of the pastoral as spiritual guidance seems mocked here as well. Indeed, the painting is also a *détournement* of "the peaceable kingdom" as imagined in Isaiah 11:6: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them."



Jorn. The Retreat at Dybbøl, 1864. *1950*.
© *Donation Jorn, Silkeborg*.

Jorn undoes the exalted genre of history painting from within, too, most directly in his series "Historical Pictures" (1949–50). He mocks all nobility of action in titles like *Nelson Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807* and *Foreign Ambassador Presents a Jet Fighter to the Nation as a Gift*, and the given scenes derange the ideal figures of history painting as well: in *Nelson* faces are plunged into bodies (which are topped by fanged mouths nonetheless), while the protagonists of *Foreign Ambassador* evoke so many harpies. Although both paintings call to mind a monstrous crucifixion by Hieronymus Bosch reborn as an Abstract Expressionist, *Guernica* is the proximate precedent; yet here the sense of history is even more brutal than in Picasso, precisely because it lacks any redemptive pathos (the sense of humor is also scabrous). This is true, too, of *The Retreat at Dybbøl, 1864*, a muddy mess of a painting, in which the putative scene, the retreat of the Danish Army during the Second War of Schleswig, is imaged as an animalistic regression. As the mad gazes of the creatures suggest, this dark world



Jorn. The Eagle's Share I. *1950.* © *Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.*

is given over to an atavistic fear, a primal paranoia of predator and prey. The series of "War Visions" from the same years (again, 1949–50) is no less horrific. Like *Wounded Beast II*, *The Eagle's Share I* transforms this emblem of state, which cuts across the different ideologies of the mid-twentieth century, into a multi-headed dragon, all eyes, talons, and teeth.

In 1957 Jorn began *Stalingrad, No Man's Land, or the Mad Laughter of Courage*, which he toiled over intermittently until 1972; at three by five meters, it is his largest painting. The title refers to a turning point in World War II, the catastrophic battle of attrition waged between Nazi and Soviet forces inside Stalingrad, and the painting shows a scarred terrain of strokes and scribbles, in which the bright yellow and blue scribbles only highlight the icy white and black grounds. Here the horror of twentieth-century history has rendered history painting as such null and void, for *Stalingrad* is a world scored and scratched into illegibility, a painting pushed to the point where abstraction *is* destruction and vice versa.[17] And yet, paradoxically, it is in this very illegibility that *Stalingrad* succeeds precisely *as* history painting, that is, as a credible document of historical experience—or, rather, as a document of the withering of such experience.[18] In a sense

17. This suggests *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* of Balzac (whom Jorn greatly admired), with history painting substituted for the nude of the story.

18. On such withering, see Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" (1933), in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1999). Might *Stalingrad* also be considered a document of the "positive barbarism" Benjamin proposes in the same essay?

Jorn executes a double *détournement* here: on the one hand, history painting is both canceled and preserved; on the other, Abstract Expressionism is compelled to evoke the very history that it otherwise evades.[19]

Given the importance of the human figure to the classical tableau—which is also to say the importance of the implicit relation between the ideal composition of the painting and the ideal composure of the viewer—it is in this genre that Jorn does his greatest damage, and here again it comes largely through the creaturely. This is evident, for example, in *Space Woman* (1953), a grotesque female that looms like a comic ghost, with multiple breasts topped by a misshapen head with yellow eyes. Our gaze is sluiced around the picture along with the paint, in a Dionysian rhythm that roils any Apollonian form, and the figure is almost inchoate as a result. (The thing at her feet, also in yellow, suggests a withered offspring; Jorn often includes such homunculi, again as if to mock any "principle of individuation.") Even more creaturely is the figure in *You'll Never Get Me Alive* (1954), an amorphous monster with a huge maw that is barely contained by the frame. Here as elsewhere Jorn pushes proper form toward an obscene formlessness.[20] Yet it is not only through the *informe* of these creatures that Jorn undoes the academic genre of the figure; also subversive is the intensity of their gazes. This is programmatic in *Yellow Eyes* (1953), a swirl of acrid colors punctuated by the shrill organs of the title, but it also occurs in other beasts whose crazy looks render our aesthetic contemplation impossible. In Lacanian terms it is as though these pictures were stripped of the protective "image-screen" of cultural representation as such, and so thrown open, via the creaturely, to the wild gaze of the world.[21] Such an effect is already intimated in *The Face of the Earth* (1948), where the exalted head, the paragon of form in traditional painting, the seat of pure vision and lofty intellection, becomes an inchoate ground where form is undone.

Finally, the creaturely in Jorn often calls up the foul. Some beasts are given generic names like "Troll" and "Brute," but he also invents mythical terms such as "Didaska," "Falbo," and "Aganak." In the eponymous series (1950–51) Aganak shape-shifts, appearing as pig, tortoise, alligator, and beetle. That is, this creature suggests a lowly being of pollution, one subject to ritual prohibition. "Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong," Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger*, her classic text on the operations of taboo. "And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused."[22] Such con-

19. For more on *Stalingrad*, see the essay by Karen Kurczynski in this issue.

20. Around the creature in *You'll Never Get Me Alive* Jorn inscribed the French title, which might also be translated as "over my dead body." This is more in keeping with the note that Jorn, along with Dotrement, scrawled on the back of the painting: "To our families and adorable fiancées, to priests, merchants, and all other sharks, we have the pleasure of informing you, in all modesty, of our refusal to participate in the struggle for existence." There is a close affinity here, if not a direct connection, to Bataille as philosopher of the *informe* (especially in his texts on the mouth, the big toe, and so on), more on which below.

21. On this tearing of the image-screen, see my "Torn Screens" in *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

22. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 53.

fusion abounds in Jorn, who seems to take Leviticus as a script for his creature-making. Taboo is reserved for things that frustrate classification, Douglas tell us, and she gives us pertinent examples: "Eels and worms inhabit water, though not as fish; reptiles go on dry land, though not as quadrupeds; some insects fly, though not as birds. There is no order in them. Recall what the prophecy of Habakkuk says of them: 'For those makest men like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.'"[23] In a sense Jorn carries this prophecy further with his mutant beings. For example, in *The Moon and the Animals* the bird is semi-reptilian, with scales on its head, while the animal is semi-human, bipedal as it appears to be; and in *Shameful Pastoral* the human seems to combine with animal and with fish and/or vegetable—a violation of the most basic orders of all.

What animates Jorn to produce such creatures? Already toward the end of the war his paintings are dominated by creaturely masks, which he associates generally with tribal art. In order "to express psychic experiences in dramatic form," Jorn writes at this time, primitive artists "bring before the face a mask, which is wholly different from a face. A totally new creature comes into being, neither animal nor human."[24] At this point Jorn still refers such representations to "human psychic needs"; in other words, he sees them in existential, even ontological terms. Yet his motives are more particular, more personal. "The folk tales and myths speak of monsters, fantastic animals and signs," Jorn writes in the 1950 letter to Constant cited above. "They are always symbols of people, of real phenomena." Certainly the Cobra period was a time of great private stress for Jorn: in extreme poverty, he developed tuberculosis, which kept him in a sanatorium from May 1951 to October 1952. It was also a period of great historical tension: the eruption of the Korean War pointed to another world war, one that threatened to be final because nuclear. Jorn evokes both registers of crisis through his creatures.

On this score his key text is "The Human Animal" (1950–51).[25] The ancients of Egypt, India, Persia, America, and even Europe, Jorn notes, represented gods as "half human, half animal," yet in the Middle Ages these same figures were transformed into "devilish representatives of evil."[26] What motivated the reversal? "Why does the dragon continue to be the holy sign of China and the Orient," Jorn asks, "while *the dragon killer* has become the most popular symbol of the West, the symbol of the struggle against 'evil'?" The occluded truth of the human animal, he insists, resides in "a continuous movement from state to state, from good to evil and

23. Ibid., p. 56.

24. Asger Jorn et al., "Den ny realisme," in *Hostudsillingen* (Copenhagen, 1945), n.p.; quoted in Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet in "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence: Cobra and Post-Cobra," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (Spring/Fall 2011), pp. 282–302.

25. See the translation of this essay in this issue. Here Jorn was prompted by reviews that compared him to Kafka, some of whose stories he translated into Danish. Jorn opposed the existentialist account of Kafka already then dominant. For Jorn what truly plagues Kafka's characters is a failure to love—a failure, we might say, in the social bond, more on which below.

26. "We perceived the transformation based on the assumptions of Pinocchio," Jorn writes here, "based on a fear of the bestial. I no longer had this fear." Freud and Bataille were also interested in this transformation of god into devil, which bears on the relation of sovereign and beast I take up below.

back again." Nonetheless, Jorn argues, some have pointed to this truth. For example, certain characters of Kafka, especially ones who fail to love, are changed "into an animal state." According to Jorn, this is not strictly a punishment for Kafka; it is also a matter of "pleasure, even redemption," which Jorn calls a release from "the curse of the good." He terms such creaturely transformation a "positive negation" of the human. It is one that he performs in his work too; in fact it is his response to the Cobra call to tap "the vital source of life" and to touch "the origin of creative activity." Yet Jorn answers this call in a manner that makes clear that this paradise is not only remote from us as a possibility but also distorted for us as an image.

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I want to focus on this "positive negation" now, and to do so through two brief juxtapositions. First, I will set Jorn on the human animal alongside Bataille on a similar subject in the same years; then I will consider Jorn in light of contemporary reflections on the creaturely as a symptom of a crisis in the symbolic order. The two concerns converge on the question of the origins—of the human, of sovereignty, of law.

Although Jorn never cites Bataille, he knew of some of his writings, and certainly they have points in common: a challenge to the classical, in part through the *informe*; a critique of all idealisms (which included for Bataille the idea of Surrealism advanced by Breton, and for Jorn the painting of Surrealism associated with Magritte); a notion of art as excess (if Bataille theorized this surplus, Jorn practiced it—his output of paintings alone is enormous); and so on.[27] Yet most salient here is their shared fascination with the human animal. For Bataille this interest was reignited in the early 1950s by the publication of *Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art* by the Abbé Henri Breuil, which prompted him to write several texts on the topic. In the prehistoric images in southern France and northern Spain, Bataille argues, we see not only "the birth of art" but also "the passage from animal to man" (the latter phrase served him as the title of a 1953 essay).[28] Yet this "decisive step" is a paradoxical one, Bataille insists, for humanity is "not clearly distinguish[ed] from animality" in the caves, or, more precise, early man "disguised" humanity at the very moment he claimed it.[29] As evidence Bataille notes that the stick man in Lascaux has the face of a schematic bird, and that the horned men at

27. Jorn must have seen *Documents*, and later texts by Bataille appear in the library assembled for his Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism. Of course, Bataille was also a key figure for the Situationists.

28. See the essays collected in Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. and trans. Stuart Kendall (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone, 2005); also see his *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955). Jorn alludes to cave paintings in his writings, mostly to note that though Denmark lacks the caves of France and Spain, it does possess animal sculptures; he also posits the possibility of prehistoric sand inscriptions. Thanks to Karen Kurczynski for this information.

29. Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity*, p. 55.

Les Trois-Frères possess the heads and hooves of bison and stags. "What seems to be fundamental is the rejection of our face," Bataille continues; Paleolithic man "masked the face of which we are proud, and he flaunted that which our clothes conceal," that is, his sex. Man "had now prevailed" over the animal, Bataille concludes, "but [in this very instant] he apologized" for the domination and blurred the difference.[30]

In a further text titled "The Cradle of Humanity" Bataille elaborates on this ambivalence of early man about his humanity. For Paleolithic man the animal is not only below the human, as it were, but also above it; indeed, the animal is considered "more holy [than the human]—more holy, which is to say more sacred, more divine."[31] Bataille reiterates that "nothing is more common" in prehistoric art than the representation of "a god in the form of an animal": for early man "the animal had . . . [a] divine quality that the human form could not have expressed."[32] This ambiguous connection between animal and god is a leitmotif in Bataille, fascinated as he is by the shared alterity of beast and sovereign to man. Yet Bataille tends to frame this "heterogeneity" in ontological terms. So too, as we have seen, does Jorn; recall his statement that the "truth" of man resides in "a continuous movement from state to state" (Jorn terms this movement "relativity," while Bataille calls it "alteration"). Yet in both cases historical pressures motivated these ontological propositions.[33] Just as Bataille turned to sovereignty during the period of



The Sorcerer, Trois-Frères Cave.

30. Ibid., pp. 169, 61.
31. Ibid., p. 165.
32. Ibid., pp. 165, 169.
33. "For us," too, Bataille writes enigmatically in *Lascaux*, "a new but indefinite time is being born . . . the world within us is altering" (p. 26).

Fascism (it is pronounced in his seminars at Collège de Sociologie in the late 1930s), so too did Jorn foreground the creaturely in his Cobra years, soon after the catastrophes of the war and the Holocaust, and in the midst of the everyday terror of the Cold War—in the midst, too, of the failure of a European humanism still tied to "the classical tradition" to address any of these disasters. It was this predicament that led Jorn to seek "a new, true foundation" for artistic culture and human society alike.

So much for the human animal in the 1950s; what about the creaturely in contemporary discourse? Over the past decade or so, the question of the connection between animal and god, beast and king, has returned. Why? As developed by Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, this discourse is concerned with the origin of law and the nature of sovereignty (both are markers of "the passage from animal to man," and Bataille is a key precedent for these theorists).[34] More precisely, this discourse is concerned with the *lack* of any solid basis for these institutions, at least any basis that is not founded in violence, the sheer violence of self-authorized power. It is this paradox that intrigues these thinkers: that the beginnings of sovereignty and law might lie in an exception to the just rule that they otherwise purport to secure and to represent.

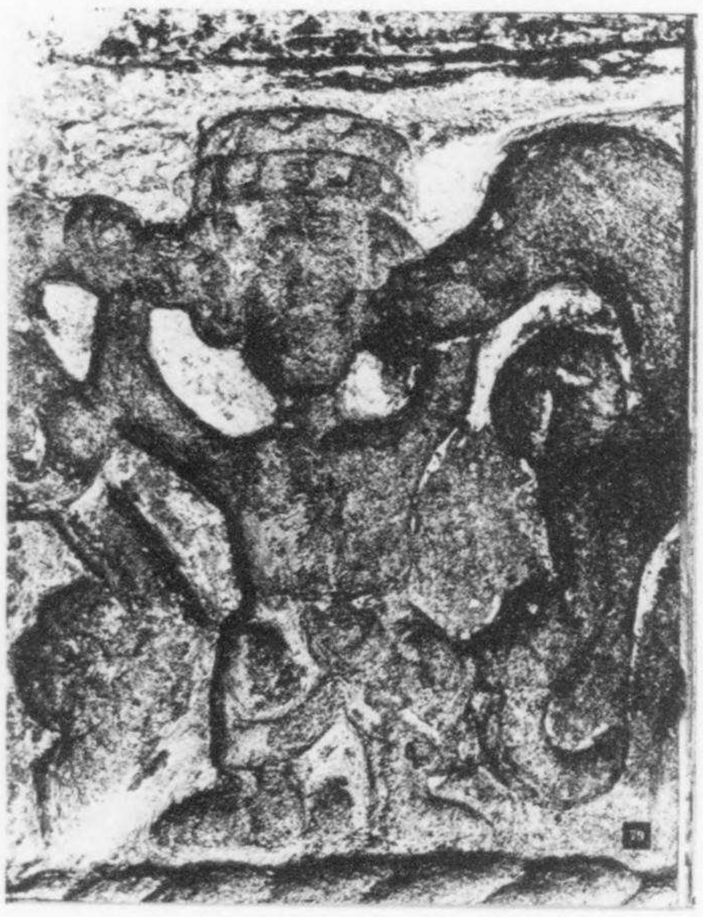


Plate from 12th-Century Stone Sculptures of Scania. *1965.*

Before his death in 2004 Derrida devoted his final seminars to the beast and the sovereign.[35] What interests Derrida here is that even as the two are opposites—the one lowly, the other supreme, the one beneath the law, the other above it—they are also alike in this very exteriority to human society, and they are often represented thus, in the guise of each other: the prince as wolf, the beast as king, and so on. The celebrated instance of this unexpected convergence is the representation of the ruler as Leviathan in the eponymous tract by Hobbes of 1651, though Bataille might point to cave paintings, and Jorn to tribal masks or Scandinavian carvings.[36] In any case, it is in this "mutual attraction" of beast and sovereign that Derrida

34. "Bataille's merit," Agamben writes, "is to have brought to light the hidden link between bare life and sovereignty"; however, "in his thought life still remains entirely bewitched in the ambiguous circle of the sacred." *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 1998), p. 113.

35. See the two volumes of Jacques Derrida's *The Beast & the Sovereign*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009–2011).

36. In his volume on stone sculpture in southern Sweden Jorn includes a photograph of a representation of a king bitten by two snakes, which might be read as a figure of the state attacked by a symbol of the people, but also as an image of the belonging-together-in-opposition of sovereign and beast.

searches for a key to the greater mystery of the foundation of law, or, again, the absence of any such foundation.[37]

Here Derrida is close to Agamben, whose reflections on "bare life" and sovereign power are elaborated in his influential *Homo Sacer* (1995). "Bare life," Agamben writes, in a now-familiar phrase, is "the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed.*"[38] This man is sacred only in the antithetical sense now lost to us—that is to say, he is accursed, at the mercy of all. Indeed, in Roman society *homo sacer* was the lowest of the low, yet as such he was also the complement of the highest of the high. "At the two extreme limits of the order," Agamben writes, "the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns."[39] Essentially, then, what the doubling of beast and sovereign is in Derrida, the doubling of *homo sacer* and sovereign is in Agamben—a riddle that points to how power is founded in a primordial yoking of violence and law. And it is this "knot"—the ruler as "the point of indistinction between violence and law," "the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence"—that both theorists attempt to tease out.[40]

This is not a new riddle; it is central to Western political thought—from Aristotle, on man as the political animal, through Hobbes and Rousseau on the passage from the state of nature to the commonwealth and the social contract, respectively, to Bataille on the heterogeneous status of the sovereign, Benjamin on the origin of violence, and, above all, Carl Schmitt on "the state of exception" to the law that founds the law.[41] In Schmitt the state of exception is not a primordial act lost in the mists of time; it recurs whenever a government declares a "state of emergency" and suspends its own judicial codes. This is why we have seen a Schmittian turn in political theory and cultural criticism in recent years: once again we live in a time when the state of emergency threatens to become the norm.

Yet where is the creaturely in this discourse? As Eric Santner defines it, the creaturely signals a kind of de-creation in the human order, a crisis in which "life [is] abandoned to the state of exception/emergency."[42] This is close to Agamben on bare life, yet, uniquely in this discourse, Santner imagines this condition from the position of *homo sacer*, from the place of the beast, as it were, on "the threshold where life takes on its specific biopolitical intensity, where it assumes the cringed

37. Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign, Volume 1*, p. 17.
38. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8. Italics in the original.
39. Ibid., p. 84.
40. Ibid., p. 32.
41. See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" (1921), in *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1996); and Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (1922), trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).
42. Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke/Benjamin/Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), p. 22. Also see my "I Am the Decider," *London Review of Books* 33, no. 6 (March 17, 2011), pp. 31–32.

posture of the creature."[43] For Santner what produces this cringe is "exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power," when life becomes a direct matter of politics and politics penetrates the very matter of life.[44] This exposure is obscene, to be sure, but it can also reveal faults in the social order, "fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning," gaps in the symbolic order that might be turned into places of purchase where power can be resisted or at least rethought, where "new social links" might be imagined.[45]

"What I am calling creaturely life," Santner writes, "is the life that is, so to speak, called into being, *ex-cited*, by exposure to the peculiar 'creativity' associated with this threshold of law and nonlaw."[46] This creativity can also take the form of criticality. Certainly this was the case for the aforementioned philosophers, who witnessed the workings of power during times of crisis: Hobbes labored on *Leviathan* during the English Civil War (again, his book appeared in 1651); Rousseau conceived *The Social Contract* as the authority of European kings and princes began to crumble (his text was published in 1762); Benjamin wrote his "Critique of Violence" in 1921, in the wake of the destroyed Reich and in the midst of the Freikorps rampages; and, again, Bataille debated the nature of sovereignty as Fascism spread through Europe. It is also no accident that the reflections of Agamben, Derrida, and Santner developed mostly in the Bush years, a period that saw stolen presidential elections, the deception of the Iraq War and the debacle of the occupation, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, rendition to torture camps, and all the rest. During this time, for all the discussion of "failed states" elsewhere, our own governments came to operate, routinely and destructively, as "rogues" (a rogue, Derrida reminds us, is one "who does not even respect the law of the animal community, of the pack, the horde, of its kind"), and in this capacity they threaten us all.[47]

The historical conditions for the recent discourse on the beast and the sovereign are thus clear enough. But what are its implications for our understanding of Jorn in particular and Cobra in general? If the creatures in Kafka are prewar examples of "the peculiar 'creativity' associated with this threshold of law and nonlaw," so too are the creatures in Jorn postwar instances; they are "crawling things that have no ruler." Indeed, as announced in the totem of the snake, this excited animality is active in Cobra at large, where, as we have seen, its force is ambiguous—both a sign of "total collapse" and a portent of "new freedom."

Born in this extreme situation, Cobra died with it. As the Cold War escalated and a society of spectacle emerged, Jorn and Constant moved on to found the Situationist International with Guy Debord. We should end, though, with the Cobra story, and draw out a moral that bears on modernist studies in general. At the outset I mentioned the familiar fascination, among prewar avant-gardes, with

43. Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 35.
44. Ibid., p. 12.
45. Ibid., p. xv.
46. Ibid., p. 15.
47. Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign, Volume 1*, p. 19.

the art of the primitive, the child, and the insane. For the most part we have charted this exploration in terms of the unconscious and the other, that is, in terms of psychoanalysis and anthropology. This approach is not wrong, as far as it goes, but, given that it attempts to register a disruption to the Western subject by these alterities, it tends to assume a stability, an identity, as inherent to this subject. The creatures of Cobra allow us to see another possibility: that some of these expressions also point to "fissures in the space of meaning" opened up by "exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power." In this light it is less a question of *where* such creatures are—we have names for those spaces such as the unconscious or the other—and more a question of *when* they appear. Potentially this is right now, or whenever the symbolic order cracks under political pressure. Such was the moment of Cobra, and for a time Jorn was able to force this crack into an opening—an opening, via the creaturely, to new social links.



Asger Jorn. Stalingrad, No Man's Land, or
The Mad Laughter of Courage. *1957–72*.
© *Donation Jorn, Silkeborg*.

No Man's Land*

KAREN KURCZYNSKI

Memory is the theme that inevitably signals the appearance of the phase of internal critique of an art. Of its bringing itself into question; of its subversion and collapse. The question of the meaning of memory is always linked to the question of the meaning of a permanence transmitted by art.

—*Situationist International*,
"The Cinema of Alain Resnais," 1959[1]

Through the filter of memory studies, the period after World War II appears as a caesura, a decade of shock or disavowal in which the recent events of the war seemed unassimilable into the dominant 1950s social discourses of reconstruction, liberalism, advertising, suburbia, youth, leisure, spontaneity, and Cold War brinkmanship. The hegemonic art movement of the decade, Abstract Expressionism, foregrounded momentary experience and the artwork's own process of making, while Informel in Europe gave heightened attention to the act of painting as an existential mark in the void. Both sides were preoccupied with the idea of returning to a "zero degree" of painting, a Sartrean "will to place [oneself] at the beginning of the world."[2] If, as Andreas Huyssen observes, "modernist culture was energized by what one might call 'present futures,'" post-war high modernism was marked by its obsession with the present moment and its radical inability to envision a future.[3] Asger Jorn and the Situationist

* I would like to thank Hal Foster and the other contributors for their editorial insights, as well as the staff of the Museum Jorn and Esbjerg Kunstmuseum, Troels Andersen, William Kaizen, and Rachel Perry, whose comments years ago helped shape my investigation of the politics of memory.

1. "Le cinéma après Alain Resnais," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (1959), p. 9. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Alberto Giacometti: Sculptures, Paintings, Drawings* (New York: Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948).
3. Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2001), p. 57.

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International, however, still viewed themselves as "partisans of a certain future of culture, of life."[4] They took a critical position toward both the retreat from politics in postwar abstract painting and the tendency of mainstream visual culture to subsume the past and future into an endless series of spectacular presents. As Thesis 158 of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* asserts, "The spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory, of the abandonment of history built on the foundation of historical time, is the false consciousness of time."[5] The contemporary anxiety and skepticism surrounding any attempt to imagine a future, and in particular an alternative future to the eternal present of global capitalism, was inaugurated in the aftermath of World War II when the war generations began to experience memory not as the comforting paradigm of tradition (or a long-discredited classicism) but as the traumatic experience of mass destruction.

Jorn and Debord would disagree over the possibilities of art as an appropriate medium to register a critique of memory or anything else, leading Jorn to publicly leave the SI in 1961. Jorn's view has been largely overshadowed by the ideological purity of Debord's anti-art stance. The eccentricity and continual evolution of Jorn's theories contest the very idea of theoretical rigor for which Debord's work is known. Even after he officially left the SI, Jorn maintained his characteristically multivalent artistic practices, funding critical actions (including Debord's own films) while participating in Jacqueline de Jong's dissident *Situationist Times* project and continuing to paint and exhibit at private galleries throughout Europe. Any serious consideration of Jorn's work must address the paradoxical relationship of painting to Situationist practices, for the singular dialogue between aesthetics and critical action that Jorn developed in this period is one of the most significant aspects of his career.

Jorn and his Situationist colleagues criticized the way the ascendancy of gestural abstraction had reinforced painting's individualism and isolation from all other spheres of politics and culture, via the rhetoric of formalism in

4. "Le détournement comme négation et prélude," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (1959), p. 10.

5. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 114. Debord's use of the term "memory" here is itself notable since, as Kerwin Lee Klein describes, the term nearly dropped out of social-science discourse in the 1960s. After an initial wave of exploration alongside the development of psychology around the turn of the twentieth century, memory reemerged again, particularly in relation to identity politics in the 1980s, revisiting questions of popular history, humanism, and the sacred, in part as a reaction to poststructuralism. Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000), pp. 44–67. Huyssen provides a critical account of the rise of memory as a major global area of study since the 1960s, when decolonization and new social movements led to a search for culturally specific memory traditions. This investigation accelerated in the 1980s with a series of debates about the representation and historicization of the Holocaust. Huyssen argues that memory discourse remains nationally defined, which suggests that contemporary memory discourses are reaction formations against economic globalization. Huyssen's account cuts to the heart of what is at stake in the expanding discourse of memory studies—not the future of the memory industry, an increasing preoccupation of scholars, but rather the need to remember the *future*, once so essential to modernism. Huyssen, "Present Pasts," pp. 56–77.

Greenbergian theory and of spiritual transcendence in Informel.[6] This essay investigates the way Jorn's monumental painting *Stalingrad* (1957–72), the coda to his series History Pictures begun in the Cobra period, rejected both formalism and transcendence in favor of more disconcerting and socially complex questions of memory and history. *Stalingrad* was a product of its time in that it responded more to the threat of global nuclear holocaust—a threat that since the signing of the NATO pact in 1949 had remained at the center of media attention—than to any direct question of the representation of the war or the Holocaust. In 1962, Jorn wrote that the great inhumanity of both the camps and the bomb was their dehumanization of people as a mass:

> The threatening thing about the German concentration camps as well as the American Hiroshima explosion lies in no way in the atrocities, which are no worse than those happening in many other places on earth. The shattering thing is their colossal and blind mass effect that makes humanity more and more valueless.[7]

The problem, Jorn and the Situationists believed, was not violence *per se* but its mass dissemination in the name of economic and political power, a power that could only be contested through *détournement* of the visual technologies in which it was manifested. Though it does not use the techniques of *détournement*, *Stalingrad* is a radical negation of monumental images of commemoration, subverting both the public scale of postwar modernism, which threatened to turn private memory into spectacle, and the contemporary manifestations of history in lens-based media that were steadily replacing history painting as vehicles of hegemonic knowledge of the past.

Memory, Paul Ricoeur reminds us, is always associated with images.[8] One of the postwar period's most significant visual responses to wartime memory, Alain Resnais's 1955 documentary *Nuit et brouillard (Night and Fog)*, was controversial precisely because of the authenticity of the photographic and filmed images of the deportations and the camps that Resnais decided after long consideration to reproduce.[9] Yet although *Night and Fog* was released less than a year before Jorn began *Stalingrad*, Jorn's painting refuses the discourse of representation in favor

6. The SI was particularly hard on Yves Klein, onetime friend of Debord and Jorn, and on Tapié, that "secret agent of the Vatican," in their observation that "all kinds of spiritualists are closing ranks these days." "Absence and Its Costumers," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (1958), in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough, trans. John Shepley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 80.

7. Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, trans. Peter Shield (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 190–91.

8. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), p. 5.

9. On the representation of memory in *Night and Fog*, see Andrew Hebard, "Disruptive Histories: Toward a Radical Politics of Remembrance in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*," *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer 1997), pp. 87–113; and Emma Wilson, "Material Remains: *Night and Fog*," *October* 112 (Spring 2005), pp. 89–110.

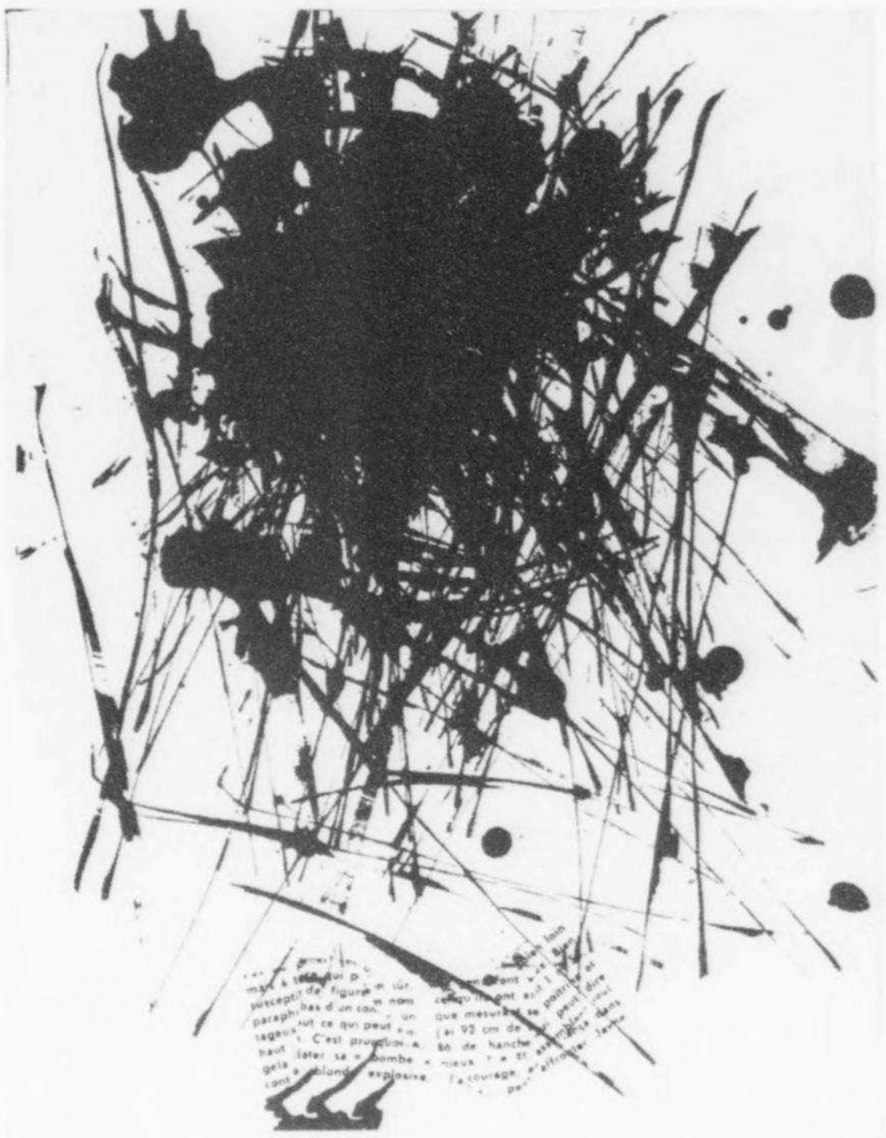
of a palimpsest of erased images and gestures that question the very status of painting as a medium of memory. These canceled gestures function, I argue, not as a sublime reference to trauma via abstraction but rather as a complex, dialectical negation of the tendency of mainstream photography, cinema, and television to spectacularize catastrophe. *Stalingrad*'s interrogation of history is directly related to the subversion of memory in *Mémoires*, a book Debord conceived as a capricious account of his own memories of the Lettrist International in 1952–53, for which he asked Jorn to contribute "supporting structures." Both *Mémoires* and *Stalingrad* critique the public written and visual accounts of memory relating to the war and its aftermath in Europe. In complex and radically different ways, they represent memory as a process rather than an image, at once collectively shaped and radically private. They demonstrate that in the personal space of the memoir the act of recollection automatically registers the invasion of public spectacles of sentiment, clichés that render equally obsolete the modernist canvas as a site of authentic expression.

No Man's Land

In 1956 or '57 Jorn began work on the largest oil on canvas he ever produced. *Stalingrad*, at over three by five meters, bears the marks of a long and complex personal history. The dates 1957–60–67–72, appearing in the lower right corner of *Stalingrad*, were the years Jorn reworked and exhibited the painting. *Stalingrad* was an expansion of Jorn's long dialogue with mural decoration and, since most of his painting was relatively intimate in scale, a response to monumental postwar abstraction. In fact, it began as an abstract picture with little or possibly no relation to the battle story at all. Jorn began with an 18-foot swath of canvas he could now fit into the larger studio that Umberto Gambetta helped him construct in his house in Albisola. The initial composition was a colorful gestural painting involving his typical zoomorphic visual symbols. According to Piet de Groof, "It was in dazzling colors, beautiful shimmering colors emanating from a white background."[10] Unfortunately it was never shown or photographed in this state; the work was not publicly exhibited until 1962, in the European section of the exhibition *Art Since 1950* curated by Willem Sandberg at the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle. It was there that it acquired the title *Stalingrad* for the first time, possibly relating to visual changes that Jorn made in the late 1950s. The title changed several times; "Le fou rire" (Mad laughter) is inscribed on the back, indicating that it may have actually been the first title of the work.

Before 1962, Jorn only showed the picture privately to potential collectors, offering it in 1957 to Belgian industrialist Philippe Dotremont (no relation to Christian Dotremont) in Brussels. After Dotremont turned it down for its unfin-

10. Piet de Groof, Gérard Berréby, and Danielle Orhan, *Le général situationniste* (Paris: Allia, 2007), p. 92.



Guy Debord and Asger Jorn.
Page from Mémoires. *1959.*

ished appearance, collector Albert Niels bought the painting on the condition that Jorn "finish" it. Jorn, unsatisfied with the painting, took this as an incitement to radically rework—or arguably destroy—it. Pierre Alechinsky states that Jorn took a large can of brown paint, the color of excrement, and a wide house-painter's brush and covered the canvas with it.[11] According to Niels's son, he obliterated the initial colorful figures by covering the canvas with a layer of grayish white and khaki using large brushes, a palette knife, and perhaps a paint roller, repeatedly altering the canvas on visits to Belgium between 1958 and 1960.[12] These radical alterations may have inspired Jorn to connect the work to the battle itself; he typically titled works after they were finished or at least in process. Visible today are extensive swaths of white, gray and light brown with vivid red and blue marks peeking through. Jorn reclaimed the canvas by exchanging a number of smaller canvases for it with Niels in the 1960s. In 1967, it was shown in the Salon de Mai in Paris, and Jorn painted the dark green area over an earlier bronze-colored layer at the top edge of the picture while it was literally on the walls of the Salon, after hours. He also stripped some of the surface layers with turpentine to reveal expanses of white, themselves already obscuring the colors underneath. It was shipped a month later to Havana, Cuba, along with a number of works from the Salon, by the French exhibition committee as a gesture of international friendship.[13]

11. Pierre Alechinsky, "Notes on Jorn," in *Asger Jorn*, ed. Christian Gether, Per Hovdenakk, and Stine Høholt (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 2002), p. 114.

12. Troels Andersen, "Asger Jorn: The Formative Years," in *Asger Jorn* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1982), p. 27. Andersen's account is based on letter exchanges between Jorn and Gambetta, Niels, Galerie Rive Gauche, and Atkins, and conversations with Albert Niels's son in Silkeborg. Andersen, email correspondance with the author, July 15, 2004; and conversation with the author in March 2012 in Silkeborg.

13. A detail of the center left of the painting, a remnant of a bearded face, even appeared on a 1967 Cuban commemorative stamp. See Troels Andersen, *Jorn i Havana*, trans. Peter Shield (Rødovre, Denmark: Sohn, 2005).

Today the full title is *Stalingrad, le non-lieu ou le fou rire de courage*; Jorn personally approved the English title *Stalingrad, No Man's Land, or the Mad Laughter of Courage.*[14] Jorn's inspiration for the title that has ultimately framed its reception as a riposte to monumental history painting was the specific story of the momentous battle at Stalingrad (now Volgograd) in the harsh winter of 1942–43. The battle was one of the most momentous and disastrous of World War II, a Soviet victory



Captured German soldiers being led to prison camps in Stalingrad, 1943.

achieved only after hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides died of injuries and starvation in the freezing snow.[15] The battle of Stalingrad, famously, was a turning point in the war, marking the beginning of the end for the German Army. In France, it was also seen as a strong indication that the Soviets were committed to the defeat of Nazi Germany, ending all speculation of a renewed Nazi-Soviet alliance and lending further ideological support to the underground Resistance largely armed and organized by the Communist Party in Paris. Jorn related his picture not to published accounts of the battle, but rather to a personal story told to him by his Italian friend Umberto Gambetta. Gambetta had participated in the battle as part of the Italian Eighth Army sent by Mussolini upon Hitler's request after the German Army became bogged down in Russia. After years in a Soviet prison camp, Gambetta walked the entire way home to Italy after the war. He must have conveyed to Jorn some of the battle's traumatic impact upon thousands of soldiers and prisoners of war.

14. Guy Atkins and Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years, 1954–1964* (London: Lund Humphries, 1977), p. 47.
15. For a detailed account of the battle, see Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London: Penguin, 1998).

On several occasions, Jorn explained to the author of his catalogue raisonné, Guy Atkins, the multivalent meanings of the work's subject and his intentions for it. Atkins recorded Jorn's explanation as follows:

> In the mid-fifties I was haunted by the stories told to me about the Battle of Stalingrad. Umberto Gambetta . . . gave me first-hand accounts of the catastrophic debacle in which hundreds upon hundreds of men died of cold alone. In such a battle the human tragedy outweighs every other consideration. It is impossible to be partisan, even though the battle decided the future of the Western world. It was a turning point in our destiny. Why and how does such a turning point come about? I always wanted to make a painting that would *be* an action rather than portraying an action, [in] contrast with *Guernica*. . . . Guernica still exists whereas Stalingrad was completely wiped off the map. It became a "non-lieu," a "non-place." The magnitude of such an act of destruction transcends the human scale. . . . The name "Stalingrad" is, in a way, immaterial. It stands for an anonymous battlefield with snow. Yet the idea of painting a picture like this can also be seen within the nineteenth-century tradition of painting historical scenes: Napoleon's retreat before Moscow. But my picture is an inner record of a historical event.[16]

Jorn evidently conceived of the central problem of *Stalingrad* as the problem of history painting in the Cold War era. His expressed desire to depict an "inner record" of Stalingrad is complicated, however, by two points: the fact that he did not otherwise consider subjectivity as entirely "inner," and the material operations of the canvas itself that emphasize its relation to the present moment of viewing.

Jorn's understanding of the battle was a memory constructed dialogically, his emotional response itself a response to the description of a friend. The situation epitomizes Maurice Halbwachs's concept of "collective memory," in which memories are never purely individual but rather only come into existence as they take shape socially. In the 1950 text *La mémoire collective*, the culmination of thirty years' work on the subject, Halbwachs describes the way memory develops after the fact in a specific social context. He writes, "We find in society all the necessary information for reconstructing certain parts of our past represented in an incomplete and indefinite manner."[17] The theory of collective memory relates closely to Jorn's dialogic understanding of subjectivity and his emphasis on its relation to direct experience. According to Halbwachs, "Our memory truly rests not on learned history but on lived history."[18] This evokes both Jorn's idea that his picture should be

16. Jorn, quoted in *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years*, pp. 47–49.
17. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Mary Douglas (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 75.
18. Ibid., p. 57.

an event rather than portray one, and the Situationist argument that the only authentic experience is the collective creation of situations. Yet the painting, far from becoming any event beyond individual aesthetic experience, actually functions between history and memory in a "no man's land" shaped by its critical perspective toward both discourses in postwar visual culture, the former increasingly isolated from art, and the latter ultimately tied to commemorative practices related to specific social groups and marked by a particularly sacred character that *Stalingrad* rejects.

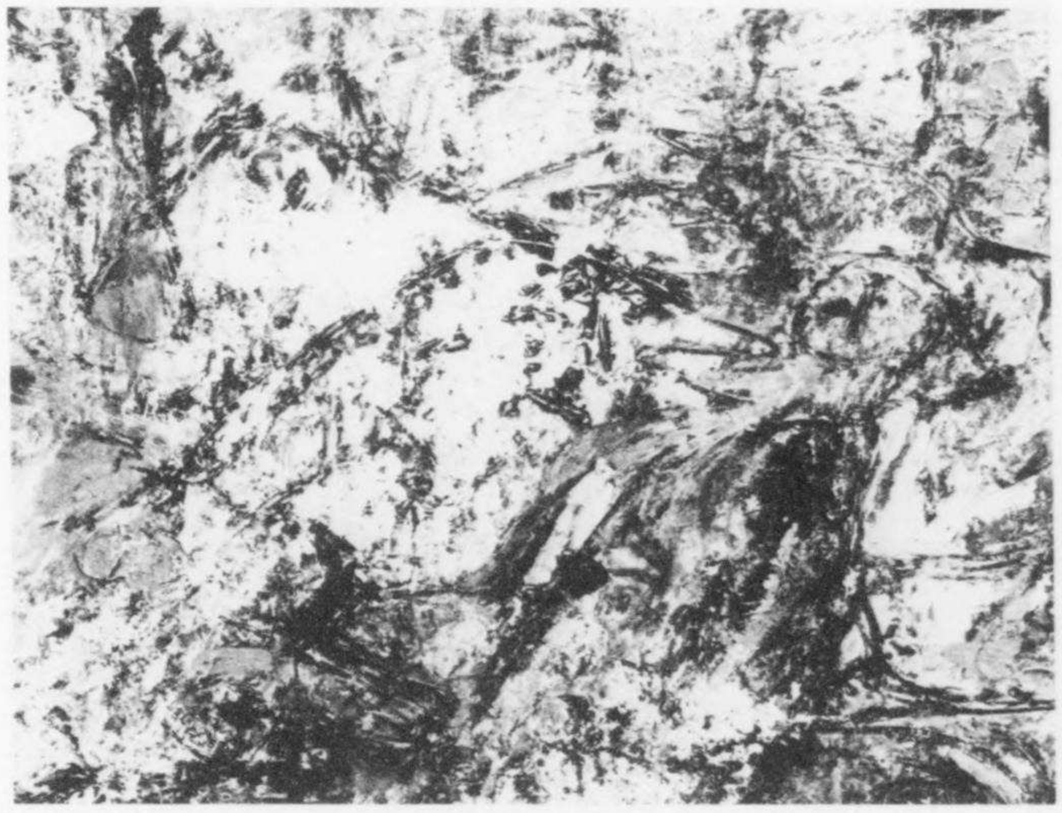
Interpretations of the meaning of this "no man's land" start with the traditional view of the painting as a site of personal conflict for Jorn: "No man's land is his battlefield, and there he stands helplessly alone before the unknown."[19] As Atkins recorded, Jorn's own comments on the picture indicate a typically modernist understanding of the work as a personal struggle:

> In such a battle the human aspect predominates—that so many die on each side and one can no longer take sides. Courage and all heroism become overwhelmingly absurd. The picture began there. It was a failure, because you cannot finish such a picture without destroying yourself.[20]

Yet Jorn was not an artist who worked in isolation; he also believed in a "capacity to create an interior between [one]self and others."[21] He openly deplored the attitude of angst and isolation that seemed to drive other postwar expressionists, like Wols, Pollock, and de Staël, to their deaths.[22] His complex understanding of the relationship of subjectivity, collectivity, aesthetics, and politics made no assumption that painting alone was enough to effect social change (an assumption exemplified in Barnett Newman's famous statement "If . . . others could read [my work] properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism").[23] Yet *Stalingrad* directly questions the individual's role in the making of history, in that it represents a struggle to face the destructive scale of recent history from a singular perspective. *Stalingrad* was his own perhaps unwilling statement that the pre-WWII paradigm of emotional expression was powerless in the face of the collective horrors revealed by the war, both meaningless and useless to halt the self-perpetuating violence of history. It pushed personal expression to a breaking point that reveals deeper motivations than perhaps even Jorn himself could articulate.

19. Hans Kjærholm, "Jorns Stalingrad," *Kunst* 14, no. 9 (1968), p. 197.
20. Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994), vol. 2, p. 156.
21. Asger Jorn, *La genèse naturelle* (Paris: Allia, 2001), p. 42.
22. Asger Jorn, "Asger Jorn hjemme: Jeg er totalt færdig med dansk kunstliv," *Kunst [Copenhagen]* 7, no. 5 (1960), p. 127.
23. John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 251, 304–8. Craven describes the "voluntarist view of historical change" in Abstract Expressionist politics in David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 29.

The material operations of *Stalingrad* refute any expressionist reading of it as depicting an "inner reality." It contains no complete gestures or images, but presents instead a record of painting over and washing away. The painting is a monumental palimpsest of accumulated incoherent gestures reminiscent of graffiti; its primary action is one of concealing and erasure. The paint is applied in scribbled, graceless, interrupted strokes that critique the grandiosity of tri-



Jorn. Detail of Stalingrad.

umphant gestural abstraction as practiced by Informel and Abstract Expressionist painters. Its gestures pile upon each other, meaningless and self-defeating. The "no man's land" signifies first of all the gestures of canceled representation taking place on the picture's surface. Jorn's library in Silkeborg includes a volume of Roman Jakobson's essays in which Jorn underlined the phrase "C'est ainsi que le champ de la signification est resté un No Man's Land."[24] The foregrounding of mark-making and erasure underscores the primary processes of signification, in which meaning is always created differentially and never ultimately present, much less directly expressible. Yet Jorn was highly critical of Structuralism's subordination of human experience to scientific knowledge.[25] Any consideration of the painting as a comment on signification itself fails to account for the political critique inherent in the picture, according to which *Stalingrad* speaks not only about the general operations of signification

24. Jakobson is actually critiquing the tendency of linguists to overemphasize the absence of meaning; the full quote reads, "Linguists . . . have done the impossible in excluding signification and all recourse to signification from linguistics. Thus the field of signification has remained a No Man's Land." Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale*, trans. Nicolas Ruwet (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), p. 42. Cited in Henrik Holm, "Analyser af hovedværker i dansk billedkunst fra N. A. Abildgaard til Asger Jorn" (Ph.D. diss., University of Copenhagen, 2005), n.p.

25. See Asger Jorn, "Structuralism and Suppression," in this issue.

but also the particular difficulty of expression in a contemporary age defined by Cold War political rhetoric.

The cancellation of imagery in *Stalingrad* participates profoundly in the broader critical discourse of proscribed representation famously expressed by Adorno in his caveat "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[26] Adorno later qualified that the brutality that threatens to make art irrelevant after Auschwitz renders art all the more necessary: "The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting. . . . Yet this suffering . . . also demands the continuing existence of art while it prohibits it."[27] Art must embody this paradox through a negative critique of society's prevailing tendency to claim it has mastered its troubled past. Along similar lines Jorn suggests that painting in his day, whether the outmoded congratulatory representations of classical history painting or the modernist humanism of Picasso's *Guernica*, was an insufficient response to the catastrophic scale of recent events. He told Atkins that *Stalingrad* was a response to the postwar view of the Spanish Civil War:

> I detested the gang of intellectuals who associated themselves with the war: Hemingway, Dos Passos, Malraux, Ilya Ehrenburg. Picasso's *Guernica* presented a challenge to me, because Picasso's manner of portraying this event is completely alien to me. *Guernica* is painted from the standpoint of the involved and indignant spectator. It is the direct symbolical portrayal of an incident. I, on the other hand, wanted to depict not the outer but the inner reality of an act of war.[28]

The "inner reality" points not only to the operation of the painting on the spectator but also, perhaps, to the reality of art itself in a society that continues to depend on war. The Situationists repeatedly critiqued mainstream politics, journalism, and advertising for exaggerating the nuclear danger and the need for personal security.[29] A series of "Métagraphies" produced by Debord in his Lettrist days had already suggested *détournement* as an alternative to expressionist protest by juxtaposing journalistic imagery, including a photograph of General Franco, with ad slogans like "pretty lips are red."[30] This playful resurrection of Communist aspirations refuses to leave history sealed in the past. Through a more Adornian negation, *Stalingrad* succeeds in embodying the inevitable fail-

26. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.
27. Adorno, "Commitment," repr. in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Fredric Jameson (New York: Verso, 1977), p. 188.
28. Jorn, quoted in *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years*, pp. 47–49.
29. Even after Jorn left the SI, Jorn and Debord proposed a collaboration called Mutant, the only action of which was to distribute a tract denouncing the United States government's bomb-shelter propaganda. Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, "European Critique of the Inadequate Program . . ." (1962); translated at infopool.org.uk/6211.html (accessed January 30, 2012).
30. See Tom McDonough, *"The Beautiful Language of My Century": Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), p. 42.

ure of painting to address the complexity of contemporary political realities. In contrast to Adorno's aesthetic theory, however, Jorn's aesthetics in general required a positive exuberance—a "wonder, admiration, and enthusiasm"—in order to make possible any critical meaning.[31] This exuberance is visible throughout his paintings after the mid-1950s—except in *Stalingrad.* More than any other work Jorn created, *Stalingrad* uses a negative dialectic to raise ques-



Guy Debord. Time Indeed Passes, and We Pass with It. *1954.*

tions of tragedy, history, and their representations. Adorno's somber description of art's double bind seems particularly suited to *Stalingrad*'s record of struggle and erasure:

> The darkening of the world makes the irrationality of art rational: radically darkened art. What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn. In its pleasure in the repressed, art at the same time takes into itself the disaster, the principle of repression, rather than merely protesting hopelessly against it.[32]

31. See Asger Jorn, "Wonder, Admiration, Enthusiasm," in this issue.
32. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p. 19.

The repression of imagery becomes an index of the repressions of postwar politics and mainstream abstract art. For Jorn the annihilation of Stalingrad came to stand for the impossibility of visualizing catastrophe without turning it into spectacle, but also the present threat of nuclear annihilation. His painting acknowledges the use of images of history in the active shaping of current events.

In *Pour la forme* Jorn defends the independence of art from theories that limit it to either self-expression or instrumentalization. The problem, he writes, is "how to avoid a complete automatism, a transformation of our intelligence into an instinctive and standardized reflex?"[33] He resists any attempt to define art positively, seemingly relegating it to a "no man's land" defined only by its critical relationship to contemporary society. Rather than a zero degree, he conceives of abstraction as a response to preexisting imagery. He quotes a statement of Bachelard: "One always wants imagination to be the capacity to *form* images; however, it is rather the capacity to *deform* images, furnished by perception . . . to liberate us from initial images, to change images."[34] In this period Jorn theorized an artistic autonomy that was not divorced from politics, as in Greenbergian formalism; it was, rather, more in line with Adorno's aesthetics, responding directly to the world from a critical distance that kept it free of instrumentalization. Addressing art's isolation from the broader public, Jorn writes, "Our cultural situation precludes any possibility for a searching, forward-looking art of a less isolated character than abstract art, just as scientists and other cultural figures must remain isolated until the causes of this missing collectivity are removed."[35] In the wake of the explicit political divisions of the war and its aftermath, art's relationship to postwar society could only be imagined as a no man's land. *Stalingrad* is the "non-site" of a missed encounter between art and politics specific to the mid-1950s.

Stalingrad not only depicts the snowy battle as a nuclear winter; it calls to attention art's fraught relation to Communism at the moment when public intellectuals from a wide spectrum of society were reexamining their initial postwar enthusiasm for the Party, whose ties to the Resistance made it briefly resurgent throughout Western Europe in the late 1940s. Communism had been a central Cobra reference, symbolizing a collective avant-garde practice opposed to the occultist tendencies of Bretonian Surrealism. By the mid-1950s, the situation of Communist politics could be described as a "no man's land" in light of the increasing recognition of Soviet Communism's failures. Jorn's contempt for the intellectual response to the Spanish Civil War was a reaction against post-WWII nostalgia for the lost political community of the 1930s at a time when many

33. Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ebauche d'une méthodologie des arts* (Paris: Allia, 2001), p. 27.
34. Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les songes, Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Paris: Corti, 1943), p. 7; quoted in Jorn, *Pour la forme*, p. 62.
35. Asger Jorn, "Ole Sarvig opruller et skævt billede af kunstens stilling i dag," *Samleren* 21, no. 1 (1944), p. 168.

French intellectuals were so enamored with Communism that (with certain prominent exceptions such as Albert Camus) they could not admit the realities of violence and repression in the Soviet Union.[36] Among these intellectuals, the battle of Stalingrad was an explicit symbol of Communism's possibilities, and the Red Army's victory solidified their faith both in the Soviet participation in the Allied effort and in Communism as a whole. As Edgar Morin wrote in the memoir of his involvement with the Communist Party from 1943 to 1951:

> For me and undoubtedly thousands more like me, Stalingrad swept away all the criticisms, doubts, and reservations. Stalingrad cleansed all the doubts of the past. . . . The cruelty, the trials, the purges, all found their end in Stalingrad. . . . Stalin was identified with the city that bore his name; and the city with the Red October factory, the factory of the 1917 revolution, and its arms-bearing workers, and all of that with world freedom, the victory finally on the horizon, all of our hopes for a radiant future.[37]

By the time Jorn began painting *Stalingrad*, Morin had been long expelled from the Party.[38] The French intelligentsia, marked by a wide range of individual positions on Communism, had almost totally abandoned its former idealism in the face of the realities of Stalinism.

Jorn had never idolized Soviet society the way prominent French intellectuals like Sartre did, though he held certain utopian views about (pre-Communist) socialist society. He was strongly critical of the Party bureaucracy.[39] In a letter to Danish ex-Communist Aksel Larsen, he avowed, "It was after Stalin's death that I first understood that bolshevism or the dictatorship of the people is identical with oppression of all human values."[40] By the late 1950s, the battle of Stalingrad evoked the dashed hopes of leftist intellectuals throughout Europe as it became increasingly obvious that legends of the Communist resistance could no longer mask the glaring mistakes of Stalin and Soviet Communism. In this sense, *Stalingrad* could be read as a critique of what Tony Judt calls the "self-induced

36. See Tony Judt, "The Sacrifices of the Russian People: A Phenomenology of Intellectual Russophilia," in *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–56* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), pp. 153–67.

37. Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris, 1959), pp. 46–47; quoted in Renée Poznanski, "On Jews, Frenchmen, Communists, and the Second World War," in *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism*, ed. Jonathan Frankel and Dan Diner (New York: Oxford University, 2005), p. 177.

38. See Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1975), pp. 209–63.

39. He had joined the Danish Communist Party (DKP) as a young man, but was introduced to its politics by a Party outsider, Silkeborg syndicalist Christian Christiansen, who had left the DKP in 1936 after Stalin's show trials. The DKP was also a nexus for many tendencies of "cultural radicalism" not as closely allied with the Party in other countries, from sexual reform to modernist painting. See Morten Thing, *Kommunismens Kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918–1960* (Aarhus: Tiderne Skifter, 1993).

40. Jorn, letter to Aksel Larsen, 1958–59, Museum Jorn Archives, Silkeborg, p. 2.

amnesia" of postwar French culture's tendency toward *résistantialisme*, the myth that the majority supported the Resistance during Vichy.[41] Jorn, meanwhile, maintained his faith in Communism as a utopian possibility, writing that "true communism would be a leap into the domain of liberty and of values, of communication. Artistic value, contrary to utilitarian (ordinarily called material) value, is progressive value because it is the valorization of man himself, through a process of provocation."[42] It was a provocation on Jorn's part to conjure the battle that signified the left's greatest hopes for Communism at the point of that movement's lowest reputation since the war.

Stalingrad records a struggle unique in Jorn's oeuvre because of all his works it most closely approaches both Adorno's negative aesthetic of art as social critique and the outmoded expressionist paradigm of art as tragic alienation, despite Jorn's considerable ambivalence about that paradigm.[43] *Stalingrad* inevitably becomes a metaphor for the tenuous position of painting as a political project in postwar culture, in light of the Situationist critique of the "global crisis of modern art," and the SI's belief that "artistic expression is in no way a true *self-expression*, a realization of one's life."[44] *Stalingrad*'s "failure" to produce either an image of history or an expressionist memory is precisely where its critique lies.

Matter Versus Memory

Approaching abstraction in the traces of erasure that overwhelm its initial imagery, *Stalingrad* is radically different from Jorn's semi-figurative works. Its palimpsest character dramatizes the withdrawal of representation via the more direct sensory engagement of the painterly surface. Despite his avowed interest in the reception of visual images, Jorn once remarked that "a picture can only be a picture of the process during which the picture arises, nothing more."[45] He connected memory to the repetition of physical stimuli that lose their power over time, the way memories fade with each recollection. He writes in *Pour la forme* that "*the deepening of aesthetic knowledge is thus due to the disconnection from memory*. Memory is the principal enemy of presence."[46] Even as Jorn's

41. Judt, *Past Imperfect*, p. 47.
42. Asger Jorn, "La fin de l'économie et la réalisation de l'art," *Internationale situationniste* 4 (1960), p. 22. See also Asger Jorn, "Critique de la politique économique suivie de La Lutte Finale," *Rapports présentés à l'Internationale Situationniste*, vol. 2 (Paris: Internationale situationniste, 1960).
43. I discuss Jorn's oppositional relationship to Expressionism in detail in "Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941–1961" (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2005).
44. "Le cinéma après Alain Resnais," p. 9.
45. Jorn, quoted in Jens Staubrand, *Asger Jorn: Aforismer og andre korte tekststykker* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1995), p. 20; cited in Helle Brøns, *Asger Jorn* (Esbjerg, Denmark: Rosendahls, 2009), p. 70.
46. Jorn, *Pour la forme*, p. 123. Italics in original.

painterly aesthetic evolved throughout his career, the physical experience before the work of art remained primary, foregrounding the present rather than the past. In this, Jorn's view was in some ways typical of the postwar generation, so determined to move forward even if it meant disavowing the past. The manic festivities apparent in certain Helhesten and Cobra paintings register, after all, a sort of polemical determination to enjoy the moment, rather than dwell on the tragedies of the war that were everywhere still evident. Jorn's painting by 1956 had evolved to a more distinctly critical materialism, in the context of his investigations of ceramics at the International Ceramic's Congresses he organized in Albisola, Italy, in 1954 and 1955. The "industrial paintings" he produced with Giuseppe "Pinot" Gallizio and others in a parodic assembly-line process combine spontaneous gestural spatterings with nonart materials like eggshells, sand, resin, and metal filings.[47] Jorn was less interested in the Bergsonian embodiment of memory within matter than in situating the viewer strongly in the present, using the grotesque to parody the banal materialism of postwar consumerism.

While Jorn's approach shared with Abstract Expressionism and Informel a certain refusal to signify the traumatic memories of the war in favor of immediate material presence, his painting rejected the overblown rhetoric of purity and transcendence in those movements. Abstract Expressionism celebrated the heroic, monumental gesture, above all in Pollock's drip paintings that foreground their own process and literal presence over representation.[48] Informel, too, focuses on a zealous experience of the painterly present, suppressing memory in favor of the moment of creation. Georges Mathieu was the ultimate exemplar of this process of making the event of painting a transcendent performance of genius, creating giant canvases in full costume before a live audience, in public spectacles performed on the anniversaries of famous battle scenes.[49] Mathieu's gestures are the antithesis of the parodic, childlike, and diminutive brushwork of Jorn's painting; his focus on historic battles from centuries past is the opposite of Jorn's involvement in contemporary history. Jorn insisted instead on awkwardness, kitsch, and vulgarity.

The year before Jorn began *Stalingrad* he painted several key works, including *Tele-Visioner*, a lurid depiction of the television as a monstrous device sending

47. On this "experimental laboratory" and its relationship to Surrealism and the SI, see Nicola Pezolet, "The Cavern of Antimatter: Giuseppe 'Pinot' Gallizio and the Technological Imaginary of the Early Situationist International," *Grey Room* 38 (Winter 2010), pp. 62–89.

48. Rothko and Newman also declared their intentions to eliminate memory and history in their work. Bonnie Clearwater, "Selected Statements by Mark Rothko," in *Mark Rothko, 1903–1970* (London: Tate Gallery, 1987), p. 72; Barnett Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 173.

49. Ágnes Berecz, "Grand Slam: Histories of and by Georges Mathieu," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2009), pp. 64–74.

alien radiation into the surrounding space, and *Nürnbergkram*, a hilarious send-up of the cheap wooden toys made in Nuremberg.[50] Featuring a masklike rabbit face crystallized with resin and surrounded by silvery drips and gaudy red and blue smudges, *Nürnbergkram* is a direct comment on the proliferation of consumer goods as the postwar economic miracle took hold in Italy and Germany. Its grotesque materiality not only critiques the rhetoric of transcendence in Informel discourse and the nationalist claims for the movement to revive the



Jorn. Nürnbergkram. *1955. Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.*

avant-garde in France, but also registers the way in which the proliferation of commodities and advertisements were coming to dominate everyday life, collapsing political engagements and partisan memories beneath an avalanche of kitsch.[51] Such works critiqued mass culture's tendencies to reduce history to

50. This work may also obliquely refer to the military tribunals held at Nuremberg in 1945–46, in which the Allies notoriously rewrote international law, creating the first international definition of "war crimes" in order to retroactively apply it to prosecute Nazi officers—a problematic application of victor's justice that Jorn would later compare to the obscenity trial of the Gruppe Spur artists in 1961. Asger Jorn, "Konstens frihet," *Drakabygget* 2–3 (1962), p. 3.

51. On the nationalist reception of Informel as a postwar School of Paris, see Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics, and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009).

entertainment and to suppress oppositional perspectives through the myth of consumer choice.

In *Stalingrad*, the action of painting as palimpsest signifies the loss of representations of collective memory, rather than an individual tragedy. *Stalingrad*'s opposition to *Guernica* indicates painting's newfound isolation from authentic depictions of memory as the subjective response to historical events. Jorn and Debord address questions of memory directly in *Mémoires*, made during the period when Jorn was painting over the initial imagery of *Stalingrad* in Belgium from 1958 to 1960. Public representations of memory had become equally clichéd in visual and print media as the number of media formats and audiences exploded after the war. As the postwar mass media focused on reconstruction, consumption, and leisure, memories of the recent war seemed fragmented compared to the public commemorations of WWI. Shaped according to individual affiliations, the memories of collaborators, resistors, Free French, concentration-camp victims, Jews, émigrés, and numerous other identities vied with each other for public recognition—and often, as in the case of Holocaust memories, remained private.[52] By the late 1950s, De Gaulle's myth of national unity had become hegemonic in France, ironing over these distinctions. The publication of his *War Memoirs* in 1954–56 may have inspired Debord to conceive his own ironic *Mémoires*.

Mémoires observes the spectacular collapse of the difference between memory and history through the genre of the memoir itself.[53] *Mémoires* reduces textual and visual representations of memory to a cliché (literally, a printer's stereotype). Yet *détournement* also forces the reader to rethink each text in relation to the present moment, or indeed to a future that now appears full of possibilities—to the precise degree that memory is emptied out of the page. Equally significant is its visual aesthetic, shaped by Jorn's "supporting structures" though they are rarely discussed or recognized (the visual aesthetic of *Mémoires* owes much to the earlier project *Fin de Copenhague* that Jorn initiated). The text fragments and visual elements, from collaged maps and city plans to Jorn's abstractions, immerse the reader in a vivid present, subverting the memoir by setting text into play with the gestural mark, the legible with the abstract.[54]

52. Daniel Lévy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2006), p. 58. On memory in Europe after WWI, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University, 1991). On competing communities of public memory in post-WWII France, see Pieter Lagrou, "The Politics of Memory: Resistance as a Collective Myth in Post-War France, Belgium and the Netherlands, 1945–1965," *European Review* 11, no. 4 (2003), pp. 527–49.

53. The texts dwell on questions of memory in quotations from Pascal to Shakespeare; anyone interested in decoding them can consult the "manual" compiled in extraordinary detail by Boris Donné, *Pour Mémoires* (Paris: Allia, 2004).

54. While I cannot fully explore its meanings here, its impact on both Jorn's conception of memory and Debord's later autobiographical projects cannot be overstated. Debord's film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, realized in 1978, and the text *Panegyric* (the two volumes published by Gérard Lebovici in 1989 and 1997) approach much more closely the genre of written or visual memoir than either *Mémoires* or the twenty-minute "anti-documentary" film Debord made about his Lettrist experience in 1959, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*.

The visual dynamism and violent colors of *Mémoires* have a visceral impact on the reader. Although Debord stated that the book was made entirely of preexisting elements, Jorn's additions short-circuit the reader's attempts to rationally comprehend the texts by making reading a vivid, abstract process, alternately playful and destructive. He scraped, splattered, smudged, and pooled the ink, using a pen to make marks that seem drawn with a matchstick. The ink blots were then printed in colors "as glaring and incoherent as possible," in an iris-print method that blends colors on a single page.[55] The process emphasizes the uniqueness of each object despite its serial printing. More physically disorienting than the texts, the colored marks scatter in all directions. They even transgress the horizontal plane of the page through flung-ink shapes that index their own violent trajectories toward its surface. Repeatedly, texts in *Mémoires* are crumpled as in a trash bin, and the ink has been applied in violent, graffiti-esque scratchings that evoke destruction not only of the legibility of the text but of the page itself.

By focusing the reader on the physical experience of the work, Jorn's marks complement Debord's chosen texts: together they destroy contemplation and activate the reader's critical engagement. The ink marks consist of a grammar of abstract form, from Rorschach images to spills, pen scrapings, stains, and liquid pours. Their printing parodies the presumed originality and authenticity of abstract painting, and though reminiscent of Informel painting, the printed structures are the opposite of virtuosic. Jorn's marks make violent, funny, and scatological gestures. The pale semi-figurative drip accompanying Pascal's phrase "Eloquence prolongs boredom" makes the painterly gesture diminutive and accessible in the banal format of the book. These are painterly signs for the ordinary—the drip returned to its original aleatory and/or scatological associations, diminished from Pollock's grand scale. They make a particularly Jornian claim to memorialize a banal, marginal subjectivity, singular but not spectacular. They help transform the partial texts into the memoirs of the anonymous reader, who attaches his or her own memories to the spectacular fragments.

Debord writes that spectacular society creates an endless cycle of nostalgia precisely because it erases the possibility of authentic memory:

> Individual lived experience of a cut-off everyday life remains bereft of language or concept, and it lacks any critical access to its own antecedents, which are nowhere recorded. It cannot be communicated. And it is misunderstood and forgotten to the benefit of the spectacle's false memory of the unmemorable.[56]

His own obsession with representing the past seems to result from this perception of its utter impossibility. If Debord's pessimism led him to refuse any possibility of subjectivity critical of the spectacle (especially in later writings such

55. Jorn, letter to Permild and Rosengreen, 1958, in this issue.
56. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 114.

as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*), however, the visual devices in *Mémoires* remain much more open-ended in their critique.[57] They are relics of Debord's experimental collaboration with Jorn. *Mémoires* presents memory as a process, shaped by a wider social context yet radically private. The book provides a provisional and fugitive space, cut off from preconceived (literally, pre-remembered) signification, for the inscription of new memories. The exuberant take on momentary experience in Jorn's work sets it apart from much postwar work dealing with memory and history, such as the cinema of Resnais or the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series of Robert Motherwell, work that is more frequently characterized by immobilizing emotions of nostalgia, loss, or even the sublime.



Debord and Jorn. Page from Mémoires. *1959.*

Because Jorn's painting refuses identification and commemoration, *Stalingrad* cannot be properly understood as monumentalizing traumatic affect in the register of the sublime, a reading that may be tempting given its scale and the violent aspect of its erasure. *Stalingrad* approaches a totalizing abstraction that in his own description—"the magnitude of such an act of destruction transcends the human scale"—relates to the sublime horror commonly related to the events of the Holocaust and the devastation of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Newman's *The Stations of the Cross* exemplifies the use of total abstraction as a way to depict the horror of those events by eschewing representation completely. Mark Godfrey makes a convincing case that the series relates to Holocaust memory, but he specifies that "Holocaust memory here neither means the acquisition of knowledge about history nor the recollection of historical events. Holocaust memorial instead requires the subject's repositioning himself with regard to the demands of memory."[58] The "demands of memory" point here, as they do

57. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York: Verso, 1990).
58. Mark Godfrey, "Barnett Newman's *Stations* and the Memory of the Holocaust," *October* 108 (Spring 2004), p. 47.

in *Stalingrad*, to political crises in the present; like Jorn, when Newman wrote about the "terror" of contemporary events, he mentioned Hiroshima on several occasions but remained silent about the Holocaust.[59] This silence was not unique; Western culture at large was relatively silent about the Holocaust until the investigation of it in cultural memory in the 1970s.[60]

Rather than reading Newman's abstraction as sublime, following the artist's own interpretation and the exegesis of Jean-François Lyotard, Godfrey situates *The Stations of the Cross* as a Holocaust memorial operating in the present moment of viewing.[61] Lyotard, by contrast, theorizes an "immanent sublime" that rejects the transcendent, an aesthetic that conveys the social task of contemporary avant-garde painting: to counter the search for knowledge of a technocratic age with an allusion to an unrepresentable with nothing edifying about it.[62] Yet his conception isolates modern art from the direct relationship of aesthetics to social action that Jorn and the Situationists espoused.[63] Jorn's aesthetic theory could not have been further from denying representation in the name of some higher moral authority.[64] The artist's aesthetic was intolerant only toward intolerance itself. *Stalingrad* makes manifest the spectacular power of the imagery of collective memory to perpetuate intolerance as well as violence in the guise of commemoration. Rather than a traumatic reaction to a particular event, it signifies the traumatic failure of such collective images, whether photographic or painterly, to prevent further violence.

Non-Lieux de Mémoire

Stalingrad's subtitle "The Mad Laughter of Courage" parodies the official celebration of heroes, while the phrase "no man's land" suggests multiple possible meanings, from its military designation as a neutral border zone to the fogginess of human memory itself, as well as the inadequacy of its visual documentation. It evokes an explicit critique of memory's transformation into history via a limited and alienating set of nationalist images and ceremonies of public commemora-

59. Ibid., pp. 41 and 47.

60. On the historiography of the Holocaust, see Lévy and Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*.

61. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now," pp. 170–73; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University, 1991), p. 93.

62. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 128.

63. Gene Ray describes the way Lyotard's Heideggerian interpretation tends to "re-mystify" the category of the sublime. Gene Ray, "Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 1 (2004), p. 4. My reading, however, argues against Ray's attempt to re-link the aesthetics of the sublime to an emancipatory project of social transformation.

64. Jorn commented on the Kantian sublime in his aesthetic treatise *Held og hasard*, contrasting the "ethical" dimension of the Kantian sublime (meaning, perhaps, the very idea of a universal aesthetic response or categorical imperative) to his own espousal of subjective desire, or "the fundamental significance of interest to all aesthetics." Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, p. 230.

tion. Jorn's reference to *Stalingrad* as a "non-lieu" also intersects suggestively with Pierre Nora's later concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory"), reframing his Situationist-period projects as a direct aesthetic confrontation with the institutionalization of memory.

Les lieux de mémoire, Nora's massive research project that resulted in over 150 texts published in seven volumes, reenergized discussions of history in France in the 1980s–90s.[65] Nora explicitly acknowledged the increasingly complex and fraught relationship between memory and history in the contemporary period. For Nora, the two concepts, while historically distinct—one private and subjective, "living" and sacred, the other public and objective, reconstructed and critical—are mutually dependent because the very operation of history perpetually threatens memory.[66] The "sites of memory" explored in the project are not just physical objects or locations, historical accounts or personal memories; they are amalgamations of all these things. As Nora writes, "*Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience."[67] Nora's observation that "memory, once the legacy of what people knew intimately, has been supplanted by the thin film of current events" directly recalls the Situationist notion of spectacle. His characterization of the "memory without a past that eternally recycles a heritage" appears indebted to Debord's description of the cooptation of experience in *The Society of the Spectacle*.[68] Unlike the Situationist project, however, Nora's historiography is driven by an evident nostalgia and a sense of loss at the decline of the nation, a "world that once contained our ancestors."[69] His conflicted position as a historian attempting to rewrite history through the methods defined in memory studies suggests a recuperation of once-oppositional tactics opposed to the Situationist project of resistance.

Nora's theory is indebted to the earlier writing of Halbwachs, whose studies of "collective memory" challenged the interpretation of memory as a purely individual phenomenon. In Halbwachs's description, memory is not an individual phenomenon but forms itself discursively in collective contexts defined by membership in specific social groups. The renewed interest in Halbwachs's theory today relates to the widespread applicability of its concern with subjective interpretations

65. Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992). Nora's introduction was first published in English as Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7–24. I prefer the translation "sites of memory" to "realms of memory" because it seems less anachronistic and ponderous, and more elastic, able to encompass objects and concepts as well as spaces.

66. Pierre Nora, "General Introduction," in *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University, 1997), p. 3.

67. Ibid., p. 1.

68. Ibid., p. 2. Debord writes, "The pseudo-events which rush by in spectacular dramatizations have not been lived by those informed of them; moreover they are lost in the inflation of their hurried replacement at every throb of the spectacular machinery." Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 114.

69. Nora, "General Introduction," p. 7.

of the past that develop in specific sub- or trans-national social contexts.[70] Halbwachs argued that a collective memory, or "lived history," lasts only a brief period of time, related to the lifespan of the group that defines it, before it becomes the written, impersonal, retrospective form he variously calls "learned history," "historical memory," or "general history."[71] Jorn's work, as already noted, also approached memory as an intersubjective formation, and participates in this critical territory where memory and history are interrelated, each existing as a point of critique regarding the other.

In many ways Stalingrad—the battle, the stories, the propaganda, the documentaries, the histories, and, lastly, Jorn's painting—is an exemplary *lieu de mémoire*, its meaning evolving as the Cold War reshaped the reception of Communism in the West. The ways the battle has been reenvisioned in numerous cinematic and televised versions, from wartime newsreels to the Paramount film epic *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), provides ample material for a study in itself.[72] Jorn could have seen a newsreel of the battle during the war (newsreels about Stalingrad were produced by the U.S., Britain, Germany, and the U.S.S.R.) or numerous documentaries made for cinema and television afterwards. As we will see, Jorn saw an unspecified television documentary of the battle in 1972. If newsreels largely drove public perceptions of the war, *Stalingrad* signifies an eviscerated screen emptied of the heroic images of battle that turned the actual battle's tragic losses into wartime propaganda. Yet Nora's *lieux de mémoire* project does not directly address the artistic construction of memory images; nor does it investigate the role of lens-based practices in mediating our relationship to history that so preoccupied the SI—what Giorgio Agamben has termed the "close tie between cinema and history."[73] Jorn's painting was a direct response to the photographic, cinematic, and televisual representations of history, and one profoundly marked by his relationship with the filmmaker Debord.

The *lieux de mémoire* project notoriously disregards oppositional perspectives on France's colonial legacy, immigration, and contemporary urban life.[74] The recognition of antagonistic claims to memory is fundamental to the Situationist project, which critiques elitist tendencies that make visible only the collective memories of cultural institutions of power such as the state-sponsored media. *Stalingrad* and *Mémoires* interrogate the hegemony of institutionalized history that represents selected memories as universal in the formats of the memoir, the documentary, the

70. See Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995), pp. 125–33; and Jeffrey Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University, 2011).

71. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, pp. 50–87.

72. For one such study, see Robert G. Moeller, "'In a Thousand Years, Every German Will Speak of This Battle': Celluloid Memories of Stalingrad," in *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 161–90.

73. Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and Repetition," in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, p. 313.

74. For critiques of Nora's project, see David Bell, "Paris Blues," *The New Republic*, September 1, 1997, pp. 32–36; and Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001), pp. 906–22.

individualistic cinema of the auteur, and the postwar painting practice that replaced historical engagement with transcendent abstraction. Their *non-lieux de mémoire* attack the very idea of official sites of memory—whether national, professional, regional, ethnic, or religious—even as a progressive approach to history.

Jorn's perspective on Stalingrad makes clear that such a military catastrophe could not be comprehended through any existing language of representation, other than a negative one such as *détournement*, a "communication containing its own critique; a critique containing communication."[75] *Stalingrad* and *Mémoires* each propose a sort of *détournement* of a *lieu de mémoire*, enacting a critical erasure of the public representations of both historical and personal memory. The painting appears to construct itself as a "site of memory" only in order to critique the very concept by making vividly material the impossibility of a proper symbolic memorial. Jorn wrote that "modern art today has perhaps become the last point from which the human being can raise himself above the external world he has more and more relinquished to the automatic self-control of mechanics."[76] In *Stalingrad* Jorn specifically condemns the "mechanization" of subjective reactions to events in the mainstream media—yet in this one instance, he seems to also question the possibility of expression itself. For Jorn, human expression always remained fundamental, and perhaps for that reason he viewed this work, begun before the formation of the SI but of all his paintings the most closely aligned with its anti-expressive stance, as a failure. *Stalingrad* instills in the observer a profound sense of loss not over the battle itself, but rather over the loss of a shared language through which such a catastrophe could be publicly envisioned and mourned.

History Memory Painting

The propagandistic representation of the battle of Stalingrad reached epic proportions in the 1953 Soviet commission for a panoramic painting and colossal monument for the site the year after Stalin's death. The Moscow-based Grekov Battle Painting Studio produced a gigantic panorama, nearly 400 feet long by 52 feet high. *The Defeat of the Fascist Armies at Stalingrad* represented with epic fervor the Red Army forces completing their final encirclement of the German Army on January 25–26, 1943. It required several decades to complete, and was not unveiled until 1982 in a specially designed Volgograd Panorama Museum.[77] The

75. "Communication Prioritaire," *Internationale situationniste* 7 (April 1962), p. 24.

76. Asger Jorn, "Hverken Abstraktion Eller Symbol," in *Henri Michaux* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1962), trans. online at museumjorn.dk/en/text_presentation.asp?Ajr DcmntId=455 (accessed January 30, 2012).

77. For a scrolling image, see stalingrad-battle.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=13 (accessed January 31, 2012). The Panorama Museum exists today along with a Stalingrad memorial park in Volgograd. On the building of the park and monuments, see Scott W. Palmer, "How Memory Was Made: The Construction of the Memorial to the Heroes of the Battle of Stalingrad," *The Russian Review* 68 (July 2009), pp. 373–407.

work exemplifies the way postwar Socialist Realism not only revived traditional history painting but took it to bombastic extremes during the Cold War, resisting cinematic documentary precisely because it lacked the inspirational and heroic qualities of painting.[78]

Jorn began a direct reexamination of history painting in the Cobra period, when he situated his work as a sort of painterly "realism" in opposition to the representationalism of Western painters allied with Communism like André Fougeron. He wrote, "The true realism, materialist realism, comes from the research and the expression of forms faithful to content."[79] He sought the new form of history in a series of predominantly black and monstrous representations he called "War Visions" (*Krigsvisioner*). These have nothing to do with expressionist visions of WWII, but respond to the possibility of future war, signaled by the Berlin Blockade and the signing of the NATO agreement in 1949, as well as the outbreak of war in Korea in 1950. They situate Jorn's "no man's land" in its broader signification of the space between fronts on a battlefield or between militarized national borders. When Atkins asked Jorn about *Stalingrad*, Jorn replied:

> Until 1950 I believed in the reality of the Cold War confrontation. I painted *The Pact of the Predators* in 1950 to symbolize the pact of the NATO powers. After 1950 the consequences of nuclear war surpassed the human imagination and could no longer be expressed in pictorial terms. The same is true of the Battle of Stalingrad.[80]

In fact, Jorn's "War Visions" anticipate Stalingrad's negation of representation in significant ways. At the time, Jorn was living in poverty with his wife and three children in Suresnes, outside Paris, suffering from malnutrition and soon to be diagnosed with tuberculosis and transported to the sanatorium in Denmark where he would remain for almost two years. For Atkins, who considered these "dark paintings" an artistic failure, "it is impossible to consider them outside the context of the personal crisis of which they are a direct expression."[81] Unfortunately, this biographical analysis has foreclosed other possible readings, in which their implosion of aesthetic signification takes on vital meaning.

Pact of the Predators (*Rovdyrpagten*) is a tragicomic painting of two or more inter-

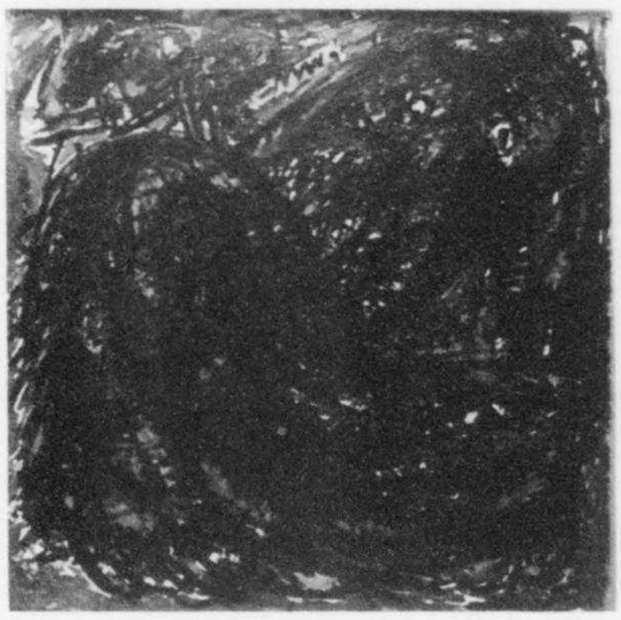
78. According to Palmer, when escalating costs threatened the panorama project, the organizers rejected outright a suggestion to replace the painting with a cinematic panorama. Ibid., p. 394.

79. Asger Jorn, "Les formes conçues comme langage," *Cobra* 2 (March 1949), pp. 6–7. Notably, Cobra largely eschewed all reference to "expressionism" in favor of "experimentalism" and "realism." Dotremont and Constant disagreed fundamentally about social realism, which Dotremont considered taboo while Constant wanted to adapt it to designate a politically engaged abstract art. See Graham Birtwistle, "Constant and Picasso: The Language of War Art," *Jong Holland* 2 (1991), pp. 33–34; and Christian Dotremont, "Le 'réalisme-socialiste' contre la révolution" (1950), in *Cobra, Vol. 1–10* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980), n.p.

80. Jorn, quoted in *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years*, p. 49.

81. Guy Atkins and Troels Andersen, *Jorn in Scandinavia, 1930–1953* (London: Lund Humphries, 1968), p. 85.

twined, barely discernible monstrous creatures engaged in a battle to the death. Jorn advised Constant at the time of his desire to depict "the essence of struggles among men by means of primitive, simple, fantastic beasts" in order to "arrive at symbols common to all."[82] No human presence, neither iconic representation nor indexical presence by means of a coherent gesture, stands for an appropriate emotional response here. Instead, cartoonlike figures Jorn called "aganaks"—"ribby, scaly, leathery or bristly low-slung creatures"—embody what appears to be a struggle with the material of painting itself.[83] The visceral image envisions the NATO pact as a brutally aggressive move rather than a defensive shield, as the U.S. claimed.[84] Taken to this visual extreme, however, angst becomes comic, fulfilling Jorn's recommendation to "make oneself ludicrous in order to transform the ludicrous . . . into wisdom."[85] This battle results in a blackout of representation itself in a crude heap of scribbled marks, a prequel to the monumental whiteout of *Stalingrad*. The destruction of the image already indicates a loss of confidence in its potential to convey the scale of political events and their dissemination via a series of new lens-based imaging technologies. The dominance of black in this period of Jorn's work, in fact, coincides with a turn to black-and-white imagery in Abstract Expressionism, which has been productively read as a reference to news imagery and a crisis in the depiction of historical events on canvas that supersedes the artists' individual problems.[86] Both the American artists and the Danish Helhesten group saw the reduced palette of Picasso's *Guernica* as a reaction to a political catastrophe filtered through the mass media and signified by shades of white, gray, and black.[87]



Jorn. Pact of the Predators. *1950.* *© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.*

The related 1950 History Pictures (*Historiebilleder*) point to Jorn's interest in history painting as a mixing of fiction and truth, an idiosyncratic perspective on events that makes history more like memory. These are dark, friezelike pictures of

82. Jorn, letter to Constant, 1950, repr. in Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra: Spontanitetens veje*, trans. Hanne Sørensen and Jette Skovbjerg (Copenhagen: Søren Fogtdal, 2001), p. 301. He associated the use of fantastic or monstrous symbolic imagery with popular illustration (Grandville and Walt Disney), social satire (Swift and Holberg), fantastic painting traditions (Bosch and Brueghel), and Viking and non-Western art. See also the discussion in Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi*, vol. 1, p. 200.

83. For Jorn's description of aganaks, see Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 34.

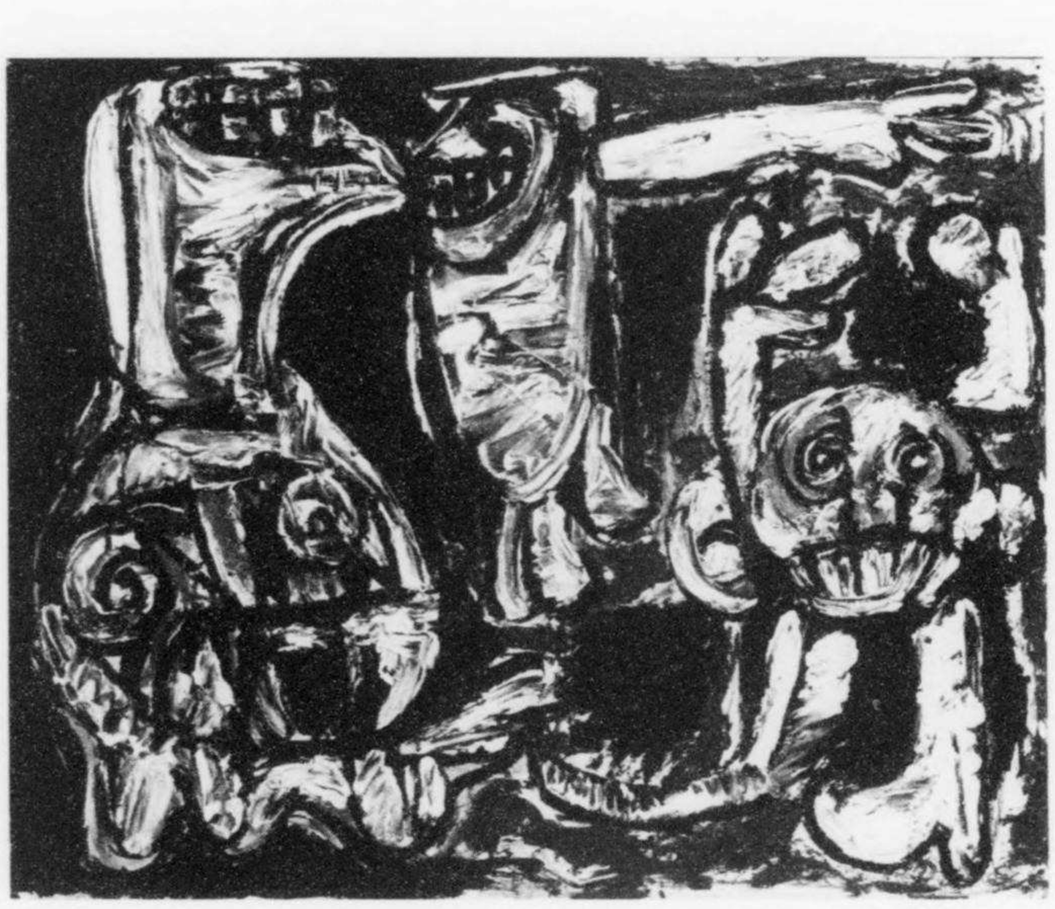
84. Tony Judt, *Postwar* (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 152.

85. Jorn, undated letter to Constant, Museum Jorn archives, quoted in Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi*, vol. 1, p. 198.

86. Gail Levin, "The Response to Picasso's *Guernica* in New York," *Jong Holland* 2 (1991), pp. 8–11.

87. Peter Shield, "The War Horses: The Danish Reaction to *Guernica*," *Jong Holland* 2 (1991), pp. 12–27.

aggressive, monstrous forms that trample upon each other, surging toward the edges of the canvas. Jorn describes his 1949 *Nelson Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen, 1807* as painted "under the whole tense international atmosphere of war at the time."[88] An indignant reader of the Danish newspaper *Information* pointed out after seeing the work that Nelson in fact had died in 1805; he had also never actually ordered the bombardment of the city.[89] Jorn defended the historical inaccuracies, asserting that "history is more for our time, and . . . realism in art is that which lives today. My Nelson picture was thus an actual picture from the moment when the NATO pact was signed, a little souvenir, if you will."[90] He thus suggests that history exists only in relation to memory in the present. He also directly connected the picture to the possibility of nuclear war, joking that if the Danish Admiral Vedel, a partisan of NATO, gave the order to bombard Copenhagen, then the picture's title could be changed to *Admiral Vedel Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen, 1967.* "I only linked a tall tale to Nelson," Jorn claimed, acknowledging the way "history's well-known figures become myths."[91] His History Pictures represent not history but rather its continual reinterpretation. They depict the process of recollection rather than the act of commemoration, suggesting memory with all its lapses, exaggerations, emotional distortions, and imaginary revisions.



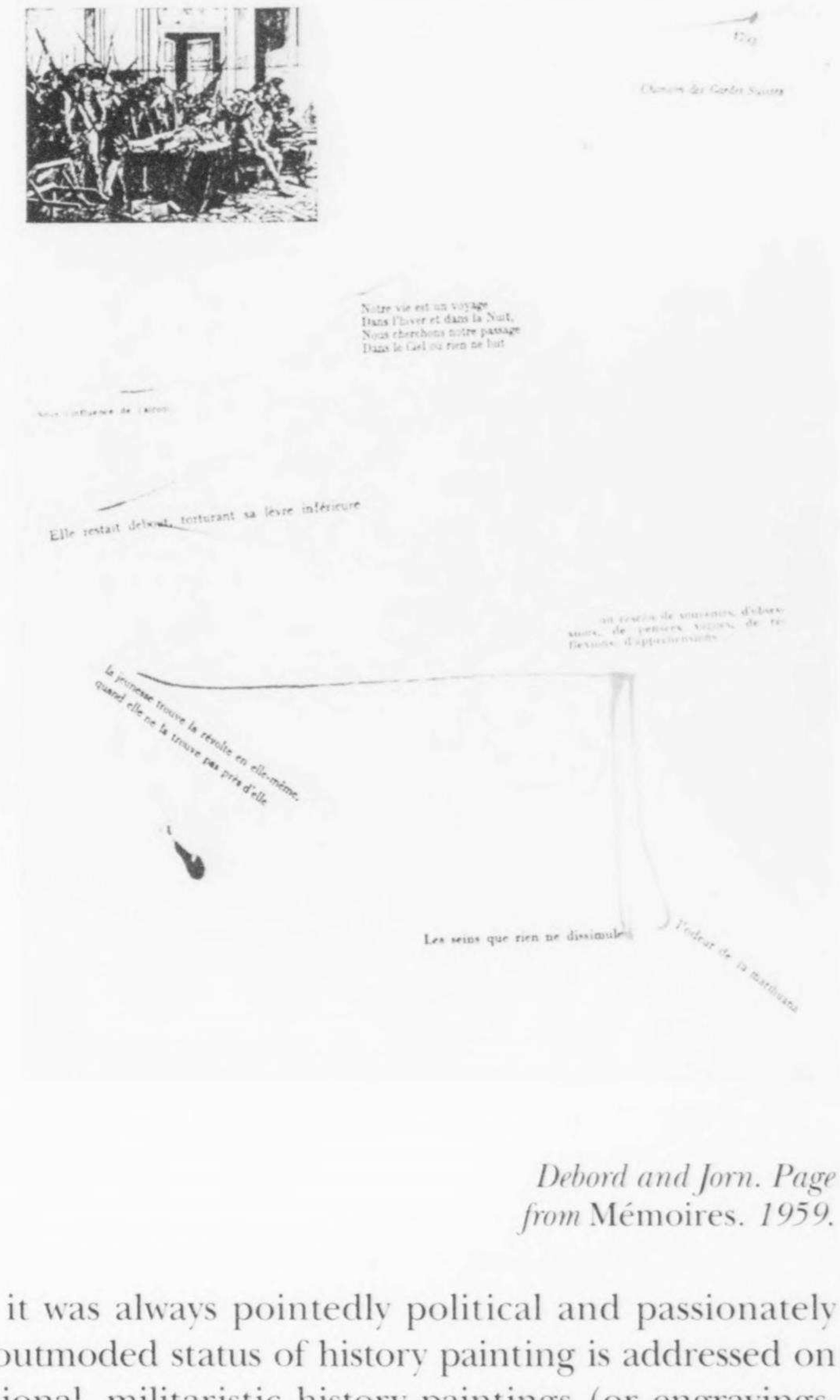
Jorn. Nelson Orders the Bombardment of Copenhagen, 1807. *1949–50. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.*

Yet I do not suggest we label Jorn's approach, or any modernist representation, "memory painting" rather than "history painting." Such a term would imply something much more fugitive and ephemeral than Jorn's painting. In significant ways Jorn's history painting also refuses to adhere to practices typical of memory. As historian Henry Rousso observes, the recent interest in memory has obscured the critical dimension of history. Memory tends to either idealize or demonize the past, and sug-

88. Asger Jorn, "Asger Jorn om sig selv," *Kunst* 1, no. 1 (1953), pp. 11 and 15; trans. in Atkins and Andersen, *Jorn in Scandinavia*, pp. 67–68.
89. The British did, however, bombard the city, targeting civilians, for four days in 1807.
90. "Nyt lys over moderne historiemaleri," *Information*, May 16, 1953.
91. Ibid.

gests continuity rather than the rupture that inaugurates history.[92] The meaning of Jorn's history painting hinges on the recognition of a break with the past, a deliberate and conscious rupture with the normal procedures of memory *and* history. His is a critical history painting in that it addresses collective identification as a failure.

History and memory are perpetually intertwined, particularly in the case of the history of the present. Thus, it remains important to speak of what Rousso, following Halbwachs, terms "historical memory," acknowledging both the critical, liberating dimension of rupture inherent to history and the subjective and experiential elements associated with memory.[93] Would *Stalingrad*, then, be more aptly called "historical-memory painting"? The palimpsest of Jorn's process suggests the continual writing and rewriting, remembering and reenvisioning, of history. *Stalingrad* represents the way history expresses collective identity in a manner that is overdetermined and ideological, as for example in the case of the nationalist discourses embodied in canonical history painting. As the work of Jacques-Louis David demonstrates, though, traditional history painting was never about an objective consideration of the past; it was always pointedly political and passionately subjective. In *Mémoires*, too, the outmoded status of history painting is addressed on two pages that reproduce traditional, militaristic history paintings (or engravings, the medium of their mass transmission): one of the Revolution, linked to the date 1793, and the other a scene from the Trojan War. The *détournement* of these images of



Debord and Jorn. Page from Mémoires. *1959.*

92. Henry Rousso, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France*, trans. Ralph Schoolcraft (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002), p. 8.

93. "Historical memory" would be directly opposed to "memorial history," or memorial as history, the monumental commemorative practices proposing a collective and morally unambiguous public response exemplified in the artwork of Christian Boltanski or Krzysztof Wodiczko.

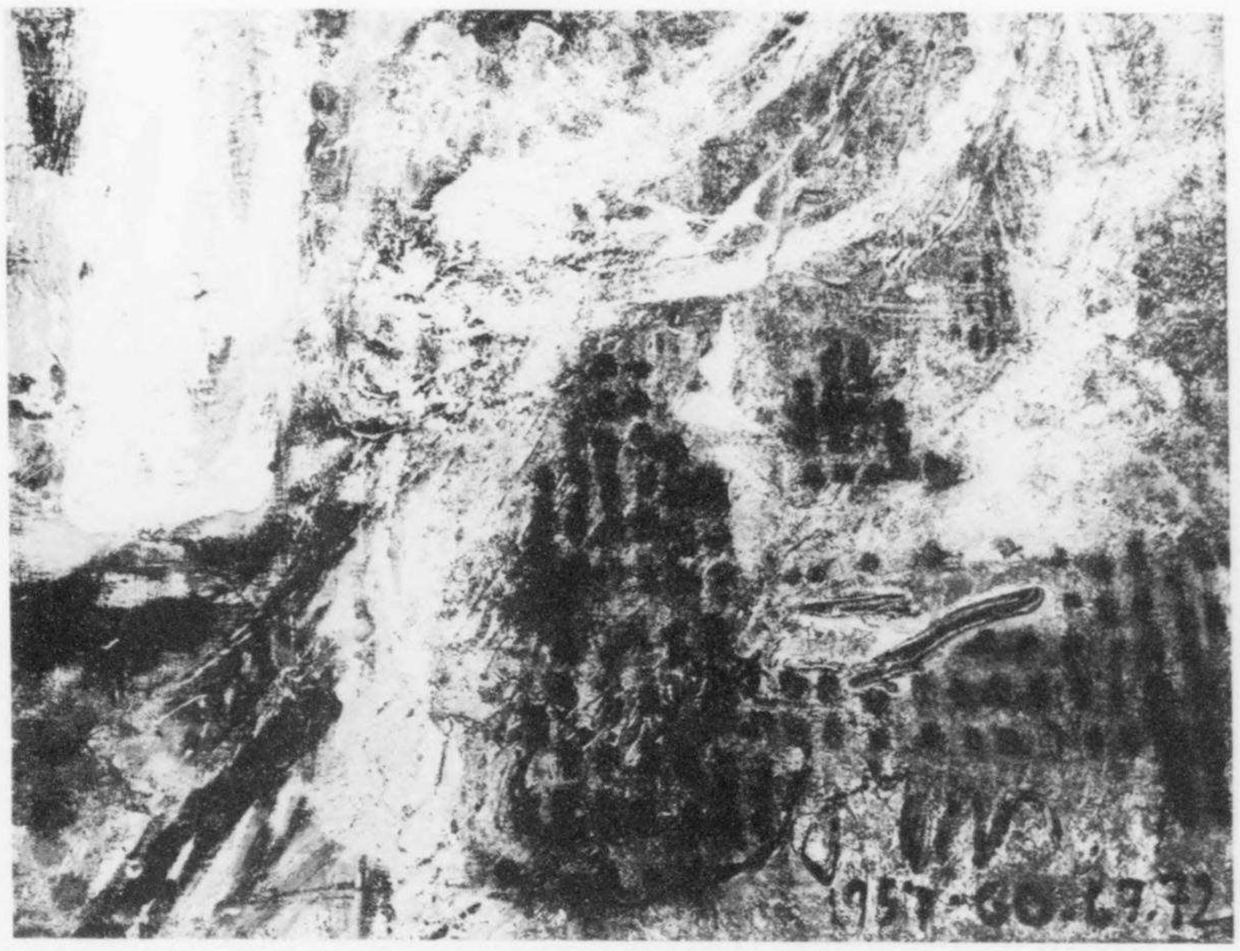
epoch-defining battles reveals them as dogmatic rather than objective, suggesting that they represent the hegemonic collective memory in the guise of history. Yet the authoritarian aesthetic of history painting—its monumentality, its one-way collective address, its cultural nationalism in the name of the state—parallels the mainstream representation of history in the broadcast media that has rendered it outmoded.

History, Documentary, and Subjectivity

Photographic practices slowly replaced history painting in the modern period, and are in obvious ways responsible for the demise of the genre. The response to photography, a practice conceived as having some relationship to objective "truth," continually evolved in relation to different technologies. As Nora relates: "Modern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image. The process that began with writing has reached its culmination in high-fidelity recording."[94] Painting's role in relation to history is no longer to present it, but rather to reflect on its (now photographic) presentations.[95] In the wake of an explosion of newsreels as part of the war effort, documentary representations of history delivered in the cinema, in a universal voice to a mass audience, were far more important than any depiction of memory in the 1950s. Such newsreels operated between propaganda and documentary, but they were called "fact films" in the U.S. at the time, signifying their privileged relationship to historical truth.[96] Documentary films of current events also dominated the war years and the two years after the Liberation in France, but in the 1950s few films, documentary or fiction, were made about the war.[97] Jorn's obliteration of the imagery in *Stalingrad* around 1958 calls to mind the postwar withdrawal of cinematic imagery of the war, and by extension the absence of current representations of contemporary acts of military violence by the state, such as the torture and suppression taking place in Algeria. The painting signifies through negation the innumerable photographic and motion-picture images that suppress ongoing acts of violence in favor of entertaining spectacles. The negation of these documentary images disperses, like static, any specific collective memory of WWII into the endless circulation of signifiers for other catastrophes that makes each event less meaningful in the spectacular system. As the Situationists insisted, this "system" was explicitly social, not technological, enforcing what constitutes history and public memory.

94. Nora, "General Introduction," p. 8.
95. For a discussion of this in relation to contemporary painting, see David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–34.
96. Arthur L. Mayer, "Fact into Film," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1944), p. 206.
97. Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1991), pp. 226–30.

In 1972, less than a year before his death, Jorn worked on *Stalingrad* again. He said that he wanted to "paint bullets on it" as if the canvas had been raked with machine-gun fire, after seeing a television documentary on the battle of Stalingrad. The burned-out houses with their empty black windows shown in the video made a strong impression on Jorn, and he wanted to "bring it closer to its title."[98] Jorn clearly responded to the strong visual impression produced by the imagery of the battle, the stark contrasts of black burned-out windows in the monumental white walls of ruined buildings and snowy landscape, as seen in the many anonymous pho-



Jorn. Stalingrad, *detail.*

tographs and films taken by soldiers at the time. The violence of Jorn's description of bullets scarring the surface aptly summarizes the apocalyptic effect of the final picture, a massive summary of representation futilely attempted and destroyed. The small black pulses Jorn painted across the surface could again evoke the senseless repetition of a traumatic response, but the black pulses are abstract enough to be read other ways as well. They appear on the scale of fingerprints, suggesting the futility of any attempt to register a single subjectivity on such a monumental field. They also evoke mechanical motion with a rhythm that rakes across the surface as if stamping it. They are reminiscent of the holes or *buchi* Jorn's friend Lucio Fontana produced in his own canvases since the late 1940s.[99] Like Fontana's literal punctures, Jorn's marks give the impression of decomposition, as if the image had been pierced and and now appeared in tatters. The apparent futility of the black repetitions could relate to some personal anguish of Jorn's; more broadly, however, they

98. Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi*, vol. 2, p. 233.
99. Helle Brøns also makes this connection in Brøns, *Asger Jorn*, p. 75.

register the ineffectualness of representing a traumatic event when the viewer's reaction is predetermined and/or itself ineffectual.

Jorn's final additions are thus in direct dialogue with documentary. Although Jorn fails to theorize the potential for subversion within documentary practice, he implicitly critiques its failure as a medium of memory precisely because of its privileged relation to objectivity. At the time of *Stalingrad*'s conception, Resnais was reframing the relationship between documentary and truth in the landmark films *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. As Emma Wilson observes, the visual aesthetics of *Night and Fog*, with its imagery of piled corpses and the disorienting textures of marsh water and human remains, are extraordinarily concerned with the haptic, a sensory presence that impedes the observer's vision and thus understanding.[100] *Stalingrad*, by contrast, is perhaps the least haptic of Jorn's normally vibrant surfaces, its abraded surface emphasizing the monumentality of its visual field, which evokes a wall or a screen. Resnais and Jorn suggest complementary strategies of interrogating the relationship between the photographic image and collective memory. Where Resnais destabilizes the assumption of truth in—or productive emotional response to—documentary imagery, Jorn raises the same questions in regard to painting, setting painting in direct dialogue with photographic media and history. *Stalingrad* depicts historical imagery as continually evolving, subject to periodic concealment, recoding, or reappearance depending on changing social needs, with a complexity approaching that of the time-based practices that now replace painting as the primary mediators of contemporary events.

In *Stalingrad* Jorn resists not only the assumption of truth that privileges documentary practices as representations of history, but also the very conventions of appropriate emotional response to historical events. At the same time, Jorn *détourns* the Abstract Expressionist gestural painting by superimposing it with the monumental imagery of history that it disavows. His painting complements *Mémoires* in developing a Situationist understanding of the suppression of history in modernist painting and the institutional co-optation of memory in the rhetoric of fact and universality that characterized the postwar approach to documentary. Both *Stalingrad* and *Mémoires* convey meaning dialogically, rejecting the one-way address of history painting, mainstream documentary practices, expressionist abstraction, and the memoir. These two works made early in Jorn and Debord's friendship operate in the no man's land after the end of expressionist responses to history, before the onset of the memory industry with its obsession with personal testimonial. Each strives in its own way for a new form of personal heroism and monumentality: *Stalingrad* with an almost Debordian seriousness unique in Jorn's oeuvre, the *Mémoires* with Jorn's more typical playfulness and humor, elements rarely encountered in the later work of Debord.

100. Wilson, "Material Remains: *Night and Fog*," p. 109. The SI praised *Hiroshima mon amour* not for opening up questions of memory but for its radical form, specifically the predominance of sound over image that would also strongly mark Debord's later films. "Le cinéma après Alain Resnais," pp. 8–9.

The Human Animal

ASGER JORN

The 1950–1951 manuscript "Menneskedyret" (The Human Animal) was discovered only after Jorn's death and published in Danish in 1988.[1] Jorn was the first to translate Kafka into Danish in the early 1940s for the art journal Helhesten, *which ran from 1941 to 1944 and published nine issues.[2] In this text, he counters the later appropriation of Kafka by Sartrean existentialism. "Menneskedyret" is framed by Jorn's impending departure from Paris due to severe illness; he would spend the next year in a Danish sanatorium battling tuberculosis.*

—Niels Henriksen

In the past few days, a couple of people to whom I have been showing my new works have compared them to Kafka, and when I protested, they insisted even more vigorously. This suddenly brings the Kafka problem back into my life, just when I thought that I had moved beyond it—a quite unpleasant position that forces me to clarify my standpoint and my relationship to Kafka before this goes too far. Some have even suggested to me that I illustrate Kafka, an idea that I played with eight years ago, which today, however, seems completely meaningless to me. And then a copy of the Italian journal *Numero* falls into my lap, in which Louis Wiznitzer presents an interview with Max Brod about his friend Kafka: Tel Aviv, 1950, "via Scandinavian Airlines."[3] What this "Scandinavian Airlines" means I can't say, but somehow it acts as an incentive for me.[4] This con-

1. Asger Jorn, "Menneskedyret," in Per Hofman Hansen, *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1988).
2. Jorn's translations are: "Broen," *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (May 1941), from "Die Brücke" in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (Prague, 1936); "Betragtninger," *Helhesten* 1, no. 4 (November 1941), two stories from Kafka's *Betrachtung* (though Jorn relied on an unidentified French version), "Der Ausflug ins Gebirge" and "Die Vorüberlaufenden"; and "Odradek," *Helhesten* 1, no. 5/6 (June 1942). For the last, Jorn probably used the *Minotaure* translation, which was adapted from *Ein Landartz*. Jorn also reviewed "I fangekolonien," a 1944 Danish translation of *In der Strafkolonie*; see *Helhesten* 2, no. 5/6 (November 1944).
3. Louis Wiznitzer, "Kafka: Interview with Max Brod," *Numero, arte et letteratura* 2, no. 4 (November 1950).
4. Wiznitzer's contributions to *Número* were signed "Louis Wiznitzer/via Scandinavian Airlines."

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versation makes me want to take up the problem again.

My acquaintance with Franz Kafka is one of the many things I owe to my old master and teacher, the painter Fernand Léger. One of those fateful spring days in 1939 during a visit to his studio, he lent me the novel *The Castle*. Back at my hotel room behind Montparnasse, I shut myself in for a few days and nights with my book. This room, with its open balcony overlooking a little backyard, melds together with my first meeting with Kafka.

Léger and Kafka: it seems one couldn't think of two greater opposites. This was the great value of Léger as a teacher—that one could learn exactly what one wanted, and at the end of it he would cut one loose from his personality and abolish all disciplinary dependence.

Then came the war years. I introduced Kafka in Denmark through the Danish art magazine *Helhesten* and translated some of his shorter texts, incidentally to no effect. None of my comrades understood what I saw in the work of this writer and how important he was to my own art. Years went by. The war ended. Kafka came into vogue. The existentialists emerged. My disappointment was immense. Was this the heart of Kafka's spirit? I thought I must have gotten him wrong, I must have read something into his books that wasn't there at all. And then I forgot about him until now, when I see that Max Brod is revising the understanding of the existentialists, and yet leaves a small opening for me.

So when I present my view on Kafka today, it comes not out of a dependence, but rather a personal understanding I have reached of the problems that constitute the core of Kafka's literary work. To me Kafka's production is about transcribed experiences and not just reflections and observations, and what interests me is the relationship between Kafka's experiences and mine. Thus the private family relations of Kafka, his illness, and personal neuroses, do not interest me.

With Kafka, what first awakened my critical sense and made me doubt how candid his humility was, was his demand to his friend Max Brod that his entire production be destroyed. This question has often troubled me as it must still trouble Max Brod, and this is the fundamental problem in all of Kafka's work. Did Kafka have the right to make this request, and did Max Brod have the right not to carry it out?

As far as the first question is concerned, I have come to the conclusion of a clear *No*. If Kafka wanted his works to be destroyed, then it would have been his unequivocal duty to personally do so. Why did he not do it? Because he felt uncertain. That is why he shunted the responsibility onto his friend. I could not forgive him for this. In my opinion, once one gives something to someone else, then one also gives the responsibility for it to that other person.

When I paint, it is solely to gratify an inner need. How could I then allow myself to force the result of my work onto others, perhaps even demand that it be preserved for centuries? The thought of this seems outrageous to me. On the other hand, I live in a society and benefit from the work of others in countless respects, however simple my existence might be. How could I then allow myself to

preclude others from benefiting from what I have created, especially when this is merely produced in chance moments? I can search for my true expression, and should others happen to find something good there, even if I think it is miserable and empty, then where do I get the right to say *No*, it must be destroyed?

Should Max Brod not have preserved these things? Seeing what Albert Camus and others can get out of them, one understands his hesitation, and exactly this explains Kafka's wish too, because it explains his doubts about his own work. However, it is this particular *doubt*, which is part of the innermost essence of his art, that raises it above the fatal atmosphere of pessimism. Understood correctly, Kafka's demand that his work be destroyed has perhaps given Max Brod the final, perfect justification for publishing these works, because it is thus done with a clear *reservation*, a reservation that Max Brod also does everything to elaborate, an optimistic reservation that expresses Kafka's sense of humor, which really must be overlooked, as it has been, if Kafka is to be regarded as a pessimist. I do not mean that Kafka's demand should not be taken seriously. It should merely be taken seriously in a different way. Only as a melancholy humor, a gallows humor, can Kafka's last wish be understood and be meaningful, and that was exactly what originally made such a strong impression on me.

I have never seen Kafka as a humorist as such. His humor is, so to speak, his positive negation, and it is this "and yet" that I will attempt to explain more precisely.

Kafka has handed down his self to us through the remarkable beings he has described, and his fine sense of humor lies in a singular, deep agreement and contentment with his own lot, with the fate of these beings, in spite of everything. Above this lie Kafka's moral *intentions*, and below always lie the negation of and the *doubt* about the truth of these intentions, and this was exactly where, in this grain of doubt about whether it all came about correctly, this splinter of humor, that I found myself and my way through Kafka's works.

It was always Kafka's sense of what is essential in this life that attracted me, and the problem that Kafka perpetually returns to is the problem of the human animal, *la bête humaine*. *La bête humaine* is not the aggressive but the erotic human that Zola has also described.[5] "Not in anxiety, not in hopelessness, but in love" do we, as Max Brod says, find the *key* to Kafka's art. That is also the way I have understood it. The dramatic still has a place in Kafka's narrative, but that is because divine, the highest, *love* cannot be realized.

How come K. never makes it into The Castle? It is because of his lack of love, but even if he had had love, he would still not have made it in, because love is lacking in The Castle too. Why was K. sentenced to death in The Trial? Because he did not love enough, but *had* he loved enough, he would still have been sentenced to death, since judges are also unfair due to their lack of love. This is the underlying tragic humor of Kafka's work, a humor that makes his art a picture of its time.

5. Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (Paris: G. Charpentier et die, 1890).

Kafka likes to use the well-known method of punishing "the evil" by a metamorphosis into something bestial, in the same way that Pinocchio is turned into a donkey in the fairy tale when he prefers to play instead of doing his homework. However, he does it with humor. He finds a sort of pleasure, even redemption, in this metamorphosis into dung beetle, worm, mole, or dog, a deliverance from what I would call "the curse of the good."

It was at this point that I left Kafka, enriched, and fell on Lautréamont's *The Songs of Maldoror.* He was even more radical than Kafka. He did not seek to escape perfection; on the contrary. After having to admit his failure with the principle of "the good," he turns the entire matter around and says, If I cannot be perfect in "the good" I will try to be so in "the evil," and what happens? Suddenly the curse is lifted and the dynamic relativity of good and evil emerges, and with this new view the metamorphosis into the bestial becomes a transformation to the good. The metamorphosis becomes the principle of the good itself.

By this all of a sudden my sympathy shifts from Plato, Zoroastrianism, and the Upanishads one step back to their monistic opposites Heraclitus and the Rigveda. Brod is right that Kafka represents a religiousness without ritual, but what is interesting to me now is the seemingly irreligious ritual or cult, in which love attains this absolute dialectical unity of love of self and altruism, centered, as the cheerful poet Schade so beautifully says between the lines, around the fruitful dialectic of love in the holy sign of the human animal.[6]

The human animal is the key problem of European culture. What is, after all, the reason that Darwin's matter-of-fact account of human origin still to this day can cause offense? Why is there such a great emphasis on convincing the animal of the ape family that calls itself the human that he is not an animal, though even a child can see it, something that is perfectly natural and normal in itself? Why are we, who pass through all the animal stages as fetuses, forced to deny our nature? Why and how did it happen that the old gods of Egypt, India, Persia, America, yes even Europe, half human, half animal, were transformed, during the Middle Ages and recent history, into devilish representatives of evil? Why does the dragon continue to be the holy sign of China and the Orient, while *the dragon killer* has become the most popular symbol of the West, the symbol of the struggle against "evil"?

Here we stand facing that horned creature with the cloven foot. What shall we do with him? Does he not even exist? Does neither good nor evil exist? Is it all an illusion? No, it is no illusion; however, there is only one opportunity to reach the truth of these two concepts, by pursuing their relativity, first their relativity to the human in general and secondly to our self in particular. But everything is in a continuous movement from state to state, from good to evil and back again.

6. Focusing on themes of eroticism and sensuality, Danish writer and poet Jens August Schade (1903–1978) described himself as "the cheerful poet" (*den lyse digter*), gaining a following in France in the late 1940s under the label "Les Schadistes." Schade and Jorn were friends and collaborators.

Nothing remains good and nothing remains evil; the truth lies solely in the transformation, the eternal movement. Now it is the profound thinking of the two great Swedish poets C. J. L. Almquist and Gustaf Fröding that seize me.[7]

With these realizations, the question about the human animal takes on an entirely new and immense perspective. Instead of being a curse, the transformation becomes a blessing, and I discover that I am not the only one who has known this wisdom. I discover that, actually, I am about to fathom one of the most secret truths of life. How often has Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* been read without the realization of what he really sought to impart by this tribute to Isis?[8] He said everything and yet he said nothing, because he had hidden the key, and because we perceived the transformation based on the assumptions of Pinocchio, based on a fear of the bestial. I no longer had this fear. Lautréamont liberated me from this, and I suddenly found out that the brothers Seth and Osiris or Ormutd and Ahriman are one and the same person, even if they are two like the Dioscuri, that the devil is God and God is the devil, because the good cannot be symbolized by one, but has to be expressed through two essential contrasts in order to manifest the transformation. I understood that initiation into the mystery took place precisely through the transformation into a golden ass, that monotheism is a deception invented to satisfy formal logic, and gradually all those folk tales of the Middle Ages, where the dragon is transformed into a prince because the princess loves and kisses the odious creature, started to make sense. This metamorphosis that I find so important, *the humanization of the animal through love*, has never been described by Kafka. It is a secret, which higher European philosophy has attempted to conceal from us for millennia, and which has only been handed down to us through the most common level of the people.

Then I started dividing artists into two groups: those who were morally *for* the human animal, and those who were *against* the human animal. On the negative side is Zola, who wrote his pessimistic novel on this subject about the human who loves and puts his demand for love above all else on earth, because this and this alone defines the *human animal*. Sartre and all the other anti-materialists share this position with him. On the other side, which, admittedly, is of greater interest to me, I have first and foremost Balzac with his healthy sense of the values of life, and Picasso with his Franco suite, wherein the superhuman, the toreador, the animal killer, becomes "the evil" and the bull "the good."[9] Taking my comparison further, the contrast between Zola's negative and malevolent book about his friend Cézanne and Balzac's "Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" is the final evidence of

7. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793–1866) was a Swedish writer, educator, priest, and composer; Gustaf Fröding (1860–1911) was a Swedish writer and poet.

8. Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, referred to by Augustinus as *The Golden Ass*, is held to be a literary precedent for Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

9. The reference is to Pablo Picasso's *Dream and Lie of Franco*, a series of fourteen etchings accompanied by a poem by the artist, intended to be published as postcards to raise funds for the Spanish Republican government and sold at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 World's Fair in Paris.

the underlying relationship between the different problems I have addressed here, and between these [problems] and my work as a painter.[10]

Today, as I conclude these meditations over Kafka, I have been to an X-ray examination and received a note from the Préfecture de la Seine, on which it says *Liberté—Egalité—Fraternité.* Republique Française. Moreover, it says I have a relapse of tuberculosis in the left lung. This makes me uncertain about my unconscious motives for this article, which I began a couple of months ago in a curious agitation over the idea that the contents of my art could be compared to Kafka's work. Did I feel something at the time, an inkling? The situation is so new to me that it feels like I am writing about a completely different person, but time will allow me to realize that it is really about me, and still this changes nothing in my conviction that we are like sparks that should burn as brightly as possible, and that the strength of the light is contingent upon the depth of the darkness, which is why to extinguish is just as right as to ignite. This is the divine law of unity that nothing is eternal which is not worldly, and nothing is worldly without being part of eternity. In a couple of days, I will be sent back to Denmark via Scandinavian Airlines. Sometimes reality resembles a bad novel. I don't like it.

—Translated by Niels Henriksen

10. Émile Zola, "L'Œuvre, 1886," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1967). "L'Œuvre" offers a fictional account of Zola's friendship with Paul Cézanne and a wry criticism of the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian art world, causing the final breakup between Cézanne and Zola.

Wonder, Admiration, Enthusiasm

ASGER JORN

In this unpublished text from ca. 1955, Jorn further develops the aesthetic theory he first laid out in Held og hasard *(Luck and chance).*[1] *In some ways the text is linked to a longer unpublished manuscript titled "Tegn og underlige gerninger" (Signs and Strange Actions) from ca. 1954, which bridges* Held og hasard *and* Pour la forme. *There, he takes account of his reading of John Hospers's* Meaning and Truth in the Arts, *Suzanne Langer's* Philosophy in a New Key *and* Feeling and Form, *and Herbert Read's* The Meaning of Art, *among other texts. He critiques the two American philosophers for their "fear of the superficial," a theme picked up again here, and suggests an "aesthetic triangle" consisting of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the scientific points of view, elements explored further in this text. In "Tegn," Jorn writes that people had understood "sensation" and "superficiality" as dangerous, but that we now have a greater understanding of such concepts. Our curiosity about the sensation of unknown phenomena, he writes, is basic to the aesthetic. For Jorn "sensation" signifies "materialism," meaning the direct physical experience of the world via the senses.*[2] *The term takes on more complex connotations in contrast to the Situationist concept of the "spectacle," which artificially replaces what Jorn calls in this text the "craving for direct sensation" with passivity.*

—Karen Kurczynski

Does sensational art, or modernism, have any real artistic value? People who think it does can be characterized as superficial. Essentially, the effect of the sensational and the modern on people and on the cultural sphere is quite superficial. In our century this superficial effect has been acknowledged and groomed with unparalleled systematic thoroughness in yellow journalism, pulp literature, horror movies, sensational sports, advertisement, etc., supported by a broad popular demand that defies all attacks from rationalists, moralists, and the religious. All that is evil, ugly, deranged, perverse, abnormal, and chaotic will manifest itself in

1. Asger Jorn, "Forundring, Beundring, Begejstring," unpublished manuscript, ca. 1955. Museum Jorn Archives. See also Asger Jorn, *Held og hasard: Dolk og guitar* (Luck and Chance: Dagger and Guitar) (Silkeborg, 1952).
2. Asger Jorn, *Magi og skønne kunster* (Magic and the Fine Arts) (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1971), p. 41.

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this craving for sensation. Attempts have been made to keep it in check with traditionalism's conservative arguments and with the crystal-clear logic of rationalism. No one, however, has yet tried to *understand*, without condemnation, without prejudice, to offer a simple *why*, out of nothing but curiosity and basic puzzlement. It is entirely understandable. A question this clear and simple cannot be posed by someone who is not caught by the same urge for sensation, which is essentially a pure amoral curiosity or *desire to be surprised.*

For something to be sensational means that it has a particular ability to affect our senses directly and thereby to agitate our mental state. This shuddering effect can be provoked by forceful shocks or sudden blasts of light, color, and sound, or when one is subjected to more complex events of an aggressive or unusual character. The unusual is called *remarkable*, precisely because it is worth paying attention to, because it triggers our attention, while by contrast a continuous, monotonous activity, involving ordinary and well-known phenomena, has a dulling and soporific effect. Surprise has a stimulating effect on our intelligence. It has even been long recognized that in certain cases strong shocks can help cure mental diseases, and insofar as we can all, from time to time, be a little crazy, it is only logical that we should occasionally need some more or less forceful shaking.

The distance from wonder to admiration is rarely greater than the distance from wonder to contempt. Both of the latter emotions result from a judgment of value about what has caused one to wonder. It is essential to point out that admiration can only be felt for something that can also cause wonder. It remains impossible to admire something completely ordinary. *Without the ability to admire and detest, the human motivation for development will disappear.* And since our inquisitiveness and curiosity are the preconditions for admiration, the pure, meaningless desire for sensation must be the chief precondition for all development. Curiosity in its purest form is the interest in the new, and all that is unknown to us is new. Thus the longing for the unknown is what characterizes our desire for sensation, our craving for the fantastic.

The rationalists and realists of our time describe this tendency as a sort of evasion, an avoidance, or escape from reality. This is a quite excellent definition. It is impossible to comprehend the material and intellectual evolution of humankind until one understands it as a continuous evasion or escape from reality, an escape that, by a fateful dialectic, will not at all further our independence from reality but, on the contrary, entangle us more deeply in the web of its objective facts. The tendency within the art of our time that has understood this contradictory logic has been called romantic realism.

Romantic realism is characterized by its appreciation of the unavoidable conflict between what we call the aesthetic and the ethical, between the beautiful and the good, by the acknowledgement that our concepts of beauty have to be in constant struggle with our ethics, and finally by seeing that the fine arts crystallize out of this struggle, the fine arts that are no longer understood as the final deco-

ration of the façade, as the icing on the cake, but as the first step, in itself meaningless, towards a new cultural and economic situation.

If we conceive of the moral as the normal and the known while conceiving of the aesthetic, in contrast to this, as the strange and unknown, we will have created a new aesthetics, which is no longer a theory of beauty but rather a theory of wonder. A new idea like this, however, does not come out of nothing. It has been predicted ever since Descartes established the connection between surprise and admiration, the confusion between beauty and horror.[3]

The New Style

In our century the pursuit of the new has gained such a colossal, one could almost say catastrophic, influence on all areas of art that it has become necessary to take a deliberate stand on the meaning of originality and particularity in art and culture (the unusual, the normal, and the exception).

Rather than science's disinterested, objective understanding of the surrounding world, the purpose of art is to express what is of interest to us, our concepts of value. That is why modern visual art is by no means an amateurish imitation of the newest science, but should be understood as an interesting parallel operation taking us, the human, as its object of attention.

Towards the end of the last century naturalists like Zola proposed to think of art as a kind of science, without much success, except with the general public who swallowed the misunderstanding and to this day refuses to spit it back out, even though in our century it has begun to go the other way, to understand science as a kind of art, an art of cognition. This new turn has had a beneficial impact on the philosophy of art, which today takes on a more scientific appearance. Art historians of the modern school, such as the Englishman Herbert Read, one of the supporting figures of the new Bauhaus in Ulm, maintain the traditional notion of art as a union of *content and form* or, if you will, *expression and order*, subjectivity manifesting itself in an object.[4] While this understanding has proved immensely satisfying to art historians, it has left the artists cold. It is a definition that can be applied to already existing art but which is deficient when it comes to the creative process.

Abstraction, or the artistic order, is of such fundamental importance that it can continue to develop formalist tendencies, specializing in finding solutions for new formal problems, and it has developed aesthetic theory along its own self-sufficiency, mainly in emphasizing the artistic *process of perception* [*erkendelsesproces*].

In its pursuit of human expression in art, Expressionism has posed an alternative aesthetic theory that, with equal self-sufficiency, establishes the artistic

3. René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989). See Article 53 for the connection between surprise and admiration, where the French *admiration* is translated by Stephen Voss as "wonder."

4. Jorn was engaged in a polemical letter exchange at this time with Max Bill, director of the New Bauhaus at Ulm, over the relationship of art and design. Jorn objected stringently to Bill's exclusion of art in the postwar Bauhaus, as discussed by Nicola Pezolet in this issue.

process as one of identification or *empathy*. It was Klee's and Kandinsky's ability to merge these two conflicting aspects that together with the theoretical work of Worringer gave German art in the context of the old Bauhaus its particular strength.[5] In our time, this form-content thesis has been challenged, and it is not, as one might have supposed, the question of form but rather the question of content that is debated. The simple objection is that, although a specific content might be expressed thoroughly, genuinely, earnestly, and with formal perfection, it can still be trivial and uninteresting if it is the reflection of a small, conventional, and petit-bourgeois mentality. The human content expressed in art is only of value if it is a collective, common human expression. How on earth do the more or less ridiculous complexes and complications of some neat little bourgeois concern us? What was previously considered the most outstanding quality of subjective expression, the individual and the original, is herewith struck from the program. However, we cannot strike originality from art without further ado. What we seek is merely a transfer from the individual to the work of art. In addition to emotion and the production of knowledge, we are looking for a third factor in art, the immediate experience of something singular, new and original, something that is neither form nor content but simply effect, sensation, or immediate impact.

However, doesn't that mean that originality and distinctiveness are expressions of the personal? No, they are expressions of the ephemeral or the coincidental, the meaningless also on the personal level, the imaginary and the phony, the theatrical, yes, even the mendacious, of something featureless and transient that plays a fundamental role in art, indeed in life altogether. This shocking and sensational side of the nature of art is well known; it is the despicable side, which is not studied but only stamped as entertainment and vanity, modernism and sensational art.

Functionalism and Progress: Relativity and Coincidence

The question remains: Can a harmonious situation like this be combined with technical and social development, and with development in general? Or is the program of the functionalists based on a dream, just as utopian as the fantasies of Ruskin?

In other words, can harmonious and predetermined technical and social development be combined with continuing change? The tremendous scientific, technical, and artistic progress taking place during the first half of our century is marked by the belief in absolute determinism—that the process of development

5. Worringer opposes abstraction to empathy as two aesthetic poles: the former being the heritage of the classical tradition in that the classical aesthetic relates to abstract laws; the latter, a particularly modern concern with individual human feeling manifested in organic form. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: International Universities, 1953).

follows a rational logic. When Einstein launched his first formulas of relativity in 1905, those formulas were based on such beliefs. It was no coincidence that Einstein warmly advocated the old Bauhaus in Germany as pressure from the Nazi regime was rising against the work taking place there. Cubism and functionalism, which were also taking shape around 1905, albeit independently of all theories of relativity, are expressions of exactly the same progressive and determinist Zeitgeist.

Now Einstein is dead, and we feel like an era has died with him, an era whose working foundation seems to have crumbled away, turning into otherworldly dreams just like the utopias of Ruskin. Einstein died a disillusioned man, who had failed on the two exact same points where up till then he had appeared to have done the most brilliant work of the century, alone and out of touch with the new, like [William] Morris upon his death half a century earlier.

The notion of pacifism, that the population of the Earth can live peacefully together without war, is one of the greatest ideas of our century, and it is based on the same belief in social harmony and rationality. We have reached this point only at the expense of two devastating world wars. It was on the basis of this pacifist philosophy that Einstein gave his approval for the development of the atomic bomb and made the explosion over Hiroshima possible. Just before his death Einstein felt that he had failed in his calling to such a degree that if could he live his life over, he would rather be a plumber.

And then again. Was not the belief in *an absolute deterministic worldview* the precondition for Einstein to put forward his new epoch-making calculations that maintain their fundamental importance today, even if the absolute theories of relativity have begun to be questioned and meaningless effects of coincidence are being demonstrated in micro-cosmic and macro-cosmic series of occurrences? Indeed, isn't the establishment of the absolute theory of relativity the necessary precondition for pointing out the existence of pure coincidence today? The Achilles' heel of Einstein, which is his failure to realize the historically conditioned limitations to his own way of thinking, also becomes his strength, the inner power of concentration that gave him the brilliant energy to invest himself fully in solving his task. The same inner conviction of the self-sufficiency of pure rationalism characterizes Cubism and functionalism, just as the play of modern Tachism, with all sorts of possible and impossible coincidental, painterly, and plastic visual effects, directly reflects the current scientific trend towards chance effects in the atom.[6]

Nature and Culture

It is rare that an entire era like the Renaissance will flare up in one single, great commotion. But when it happens, it fosters innumerable, undreamt-of new possibilities, because new efforts will break all rules and regulations. Outside of this kind of sensation, however, the occurrence of anything new of any impor-

6. Added below: "and effects of chance in evolution."

tance is unlikely. The innumerable voyages of discovery of the civilized world can be seen as unavoidable results of technical development. However, these expeditions were not organized out of necessity. Columbus had enough difficulty even being allowed to discover America. They were the direct result of love of adventure and desire for sensation. The Chinese people, for example, with their highly developed culture, have never been occupied with this kind of nonsense. The fact that every single new discovery triggers an immense number of consequential actions is a different issue. It is those [actions] one appeals to when one attempts to make people believe that a totally harmonious development is attainable.

The pursuit of the new as an aesthetic principle was established as a program for architects and craftsmen for the first time in the movement, inspired by the work of Ruskin and Morris, that spread in 1894 from England to the continent under the name of "the new style" or *Jugendstil*, and which was specifically directed against the frenzied imitation of style and confusion of style within architecture and industrial design. Its starting point was the sense of style that had already been intimated in the visual arts through naturalism, Impressionism, and Expressionism, in the form that had been developed by artists like Rodin, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Toulouse-Lautrec. After a few initial years of bitter struggle, the movement experienced a rather fabulous success, and novelties, one more remarkable than the other, succeeded each other at an increasing pace until the limit of renewal within the given structural framework had been reached and the architectural trend, in keeping with Cubism in visual art, pointed us in a different direction, towards standardization and rationalization, towards *functionalism.*[7]

Futurism and Surrealism

This about-face, which was first made in France, soon had its effect in Germany and the northern European countries as well. Contrary to this development, the tendency towards a novelty style, a permanent modernism, had its revival in Russia and in Italy under the banner of *Futurism.* This time it was from the outset a comprehensive artistic movement, which was primarily significant in literature and visual art, but also played an influential role in the field of architecture.

The dynamic absurdity of the Futurist program was realizable in a state of social chaos. However, when confronted with just the outline of an organized social structure, it would dissolve or deform, as it did under the Soviet regime in Russia and under Fascism in Italy. As architecture and industrial design in Western Europe was stripped of all elements of surprise and novelty in an effort to create a new functional structure, so in Eastern Europe all other concerns had to yield to the task of creating a new social structure. Italian Fascism, on the other hand, revived the old cooperative social structure, and was extremely dependent on

7. Added below: "Van de Velde, who had been part of the struggle for the new style, was also one of the first to realize the necessity of this new direction."

superficial novelty effects. This is why it was pleased to embrace Futurism, so pleased it would end up squeezing Futurism to death in its enthusiasm.

But the trend would not die. The seed was too vigorous. Through his professorship at the old Bauhaus, the Russian painter Kandinsky ended up having a profound influence on the artistic development of this century. In his most important period in Russia, he framed a dynamic visual artistic style based on *Jugendstil* and certain Futurist inspirations. It was during this period that he wrote the book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in which he asserts that "the objects which we meet for the first time immediately leave a spiritual imprint on us."

At the same moment the Italian[-born] Futurist writer Apollinaire sought to clear the way for the development of Surrealism in Paris by declaring that *it is the fundamental importance of the element of surprise to the art of the twentieth century* that distinguishes it from anything that has been done before, which is only to say that it is the *Futurist* element since the new and the surprising are the same.[8] Compared to "the new style," *Surrealism* represented a retreat in that it avoided creating new forms and contented itself, like the *Dadaists*, with surprising through new and shocking juxtapositions of known, normal, and everyday forms, by which they managed to shake us out of our rigidly habitual perception of the things that normally surround us so that we experienced them in a new way.

The shocks inflicted on the European audience by the Dadaist and Surrealist artists paled, however, in comparison with the experience of the horrors, destruction, torture, and mass murder of the Second World War. Nevertheless, after the war the Surrealists thought they could continue where they had left off. André Breton returned from America and began playing billiards on a table which he had installed in an art exhibition. This no longer had the shocking effect on the audience that he had expected. During the evacuation of Dunkirk, as the war was raging around him, a young man, really just a boy, was going in circles around a billiard table in a run-down and derelict public house on the outskirts of town. He did not know what to do and so he set up a game. This was the writer Christian Dotremont. Several years later, when he encountered the work of Breton in an exhibition, he finally understood that he belonged to another world, that he was a representative of another kind of art, *un art autre*, as the typical aesthete [Michel] Tapié calls it. The era of Surrealism was over.

Experimental Art

The consequence of this realization was the establishment of the "International Group for Experimental Art." This was the official name of Cobra. On the occassion of the group's first exhibition in Paris in 1951, at Galerie Pierre, there was an outcry from Charles Estienne, who claimed that art is not experi-

8. Apollinaire was the first to coin the word "surrealism" in the program notes for Jean Cocteau and Eric Satie's ballet *Parade*, first performed on May 18, 1917. For Apollonaire's development of an aesthetic of surprise in 1914, see Willard Bohn, "From Surrealism to Surrealism: Apollinaire and Breton," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2 (Winter 1977).

ment but completion.[9] He did not understand that the expression "experimental art" contains an inherent contradiction between the experimental and the artistic, just like the contradiction inherent in the term it replaced, "the fine arts." We simply replaced the "fine" with the "experimental," and the future would show we were right. By doing this we extended the concept of art to include a far wider scope, which also contained the "fine" among other things. The most important effect of this expansion, however, is the organic connection that it helps create in our understanding of art and culture. There suddenly appears a connection, a sense of meaning, a development or dynamic, between different, seemingly independent art forms and movements. It allows just the sort of organic understanding of art that Estienne is a stubborn supporter of, even if he fails to substantiate it. Experience, emotion, and realization become three clearly divided stages in the same acquisition process and embody the artistic element, just as the skin, muscle, and skeleton embody the physical human being. We discovered that artistic superficiality was the precondition for attaining artistic depth, that the surface world is immensely important in itself, not just in art and culture but also in nature, even in the world of minerals. Structure, form and surface are two different things. We realized that the true form is the form of content, but in order to renew the content it is absolutely necessary to employ the false and imagined form. From now on the entire classic attitude towards art and architecture, including Cubism and functionalism, is deemed outdated and useless.

The Sensational Development

The experimental or initial phase in the development of an event or in the shaping of a phenomenon has a bewildering, fermenting, swelling character called sensationalization. We know very well the situation when something flares up and becomes a sensation, becomes fashionable, and appears like a radiant and exciting force dragging everyone along. Humans display a quite absurd enthusiasm for this kind of phenomenon. It is allowed to spread beyond all natural and unnatural boundaries, and then it collapses. What remains after such processes of sensationalization is what we call art and culture, and if the artist has not experienced this kind of sensation at least at some point during the preparation of his work of art, then it is unsuccessful. Should the audience not experience it, then it is only of interest to artists.

9. Jorn curated an exhibition in April 1951, called "5 Peintres de Cobra," at Pierre Loeb's Galerie Pierre. This was actually the second Cobra exhibition in Paris, after Michel Ragon's exhibition at Librarie 73 in February 1951. Charles Estienne, the critic who coined "Tâchisme" and wrote the catalogue text for the 1951 Cobra exhibition in Liège, reviewed the Ragon exhibition. He read its relationship to Surrealist automatism but labeled Cobra "an aesthetic of confusion," relating it to the anguish of postwar civilization. Charles Estienne, "L'expérience est-elle une création?," *L'Observateur*, March 1, 1951, quoted in Jean-Clarence Lambert, ed. *Charles Estienne et l'art à Paris* (Paris: Centre National des Arts Plastiques, 1984), p. 87.

On Deliberate and Systematic Experimentation in Art

Chance effects appear of their own accord and seemingly maintain themselves as well, so that all one has to do is to counteract them. This is the way it looks today and this is the way it has always looked. There can be no doubt, however, that the situation is nearing a critical point in human cultural evolution, where coincidental effects in social life are becoming more and more scarce, where existence is becoming so organized and regulated that the pursuit of sensation and adventure will turn panicked and sterile. The rampant culture of sports, the purpose of which is purely sensational, already marks one important step in this direction. It is, however, predictable that this kind of urge for sensation will in time ebb away, become more and more rare, until it is replaced by an apathetic and routine existence characterized by complete equilibrium, a perfect indifference or absolute harmony. This social development is inevitable and quite independent of political programs, whether these are supporters or opponents of the tendency towards such an ant-like existence. This will happen with the inevitability of a natural law. No struggle for the so-called "free and private initiative" can change an iota in this development. On the contrary, that will only make it more unconscious and uncontrolled. The only way to avoid this definitive stagnation is to accept its seeming inevitability, to find the principles by which it develops and the principles that can keep it in check.

The Experiment in Albisola 1954

The year of 1954 was not only marked by the breakthrough of Tachism in Paris. The same trend became the dominant factor at the Venice Biennale, especially in the humanly expressive form that characterized the Cobra movement and which some associate with Expressionism. The exhibition signaled the definitive breakthrough of the three Dutch painters Appel, Corneille, and de Kooning. The last exhibited as an American in the pavilion of the United States. Max Ernst was awarded the honorary prize of the biennial, and for this reason was excluded by Breton from the Surrealist group, which thus lost its last important artist member.

At the same time as the biennial for visual art in Venice, a triennial for arts and crafts and industrial design was held in Milan. During the last month of this exhibition, the first organized and deliberate modern opposition against rationalist functionalism, which has now dominated the active and creative segment of architecture and the so-called applied arts since the last world war [World War I], could be observed.

The group presenting under the label of "International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus" exhibited a series of ceramic experiments executed under the international gatherings in the ceramics town of Albisola north of Genoa.[10] The exhibited works had been carried out at the ceramics factory of Mazzotti by the

10. These gatherings took place in 1954 and 1955.

painters of the Cobra group, Appel, Corneille, and myself; together with the [South-]American painter Matta, who has previously worked with Le Corbusier and has belonged to the circle of Breton for some time; the Argentinian-Italian sculptor Fontana; and the Italian painters Baj, Dangelo, and Scanavino. In addition to those, the gatherings included the painter Alechinsky and the writers Dotremont and Jaguer. As such they were a kind of reiteration of those international gatherings that took place in the summer of 1949 in the Danish art academy's weekend cottage in Bregnerød, where the working program of Cobra was agreed upon, and where the concrete result was a series of collective mural decorations left in the building. In Albisola we left our traces in clay. The meeting was an attempt to find possibilities for renewing the collaboration, which had been annulled for years, and to give it a new and more precise foundation. The exhibition was in itself an intervention in the debate that we had opened on the most essential point and with the most important personality in regard to our problem: the Swiss architect Max Bill, leader of a new college of design, which is being established at Ulm in Germany, and which is meant to replace the old Bauhaus that was destroyed by the Nazis. During the triennial a congress for "industrial design" was held, at which Max Bill was the opening speaker. The last day of the congress, a violent confrontation built up between Max Bill and the rationalists on the one side and, on the other, the author of this text supported by Fontana and other sculptors, who received lively applause from confused modernists and sensation-hungry onlookers. The discussion was the continuation of an agitated correspondence between the author of this text and the new director at Ulm. It is still going on. It will continue to go on until a concrete result is reached. The standpoint of the movement is communicated through a series of information bulletins similar to the one that was issued in the context of Bregnerød.

The Utopian Understanding of Architecture

In order to understand what this quarrel is really about, it is necessary to return to the very outset of the modern understanding of architecture as it was conceived in the middle of the last century by the English utopian Ruskin and his most important disciple Morris. Their rigorous program was launched in the first desperate struggle against the chaotic and destructive confusion of production and of style that arose with the emergence of factory-based, mechanical production.

Humanity has evolved through a process of learning to master nature by means of art and technology. Today the challenge is to master the technology that we ourselves have created. Those resources that are at our disposal automatically combine in the unity that we call our life-form, just as the experiences that we

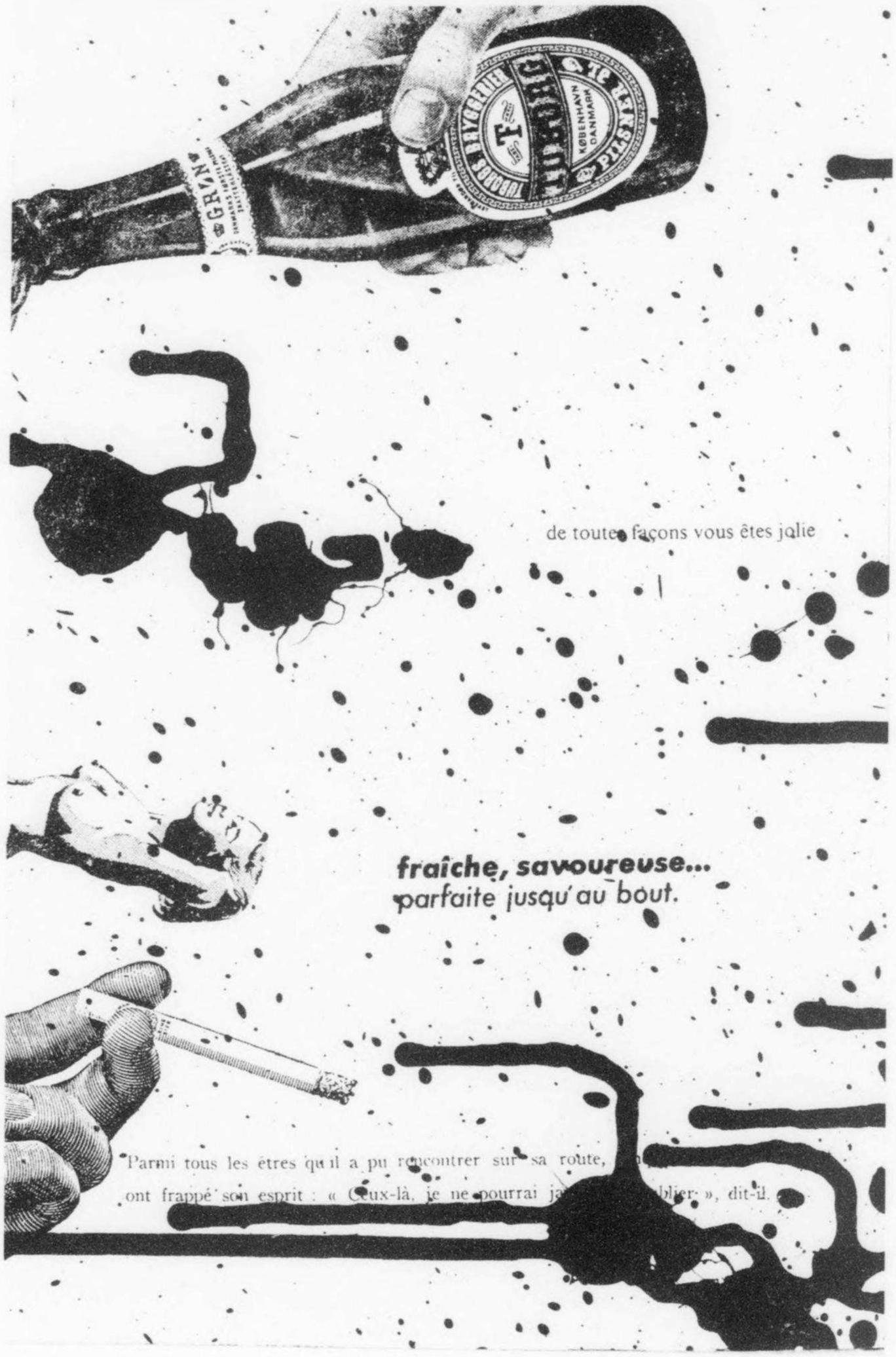
have acquired, the knowledge that we have gathered, consolidate into an understanding of life or worldview. Now, if only all these new possibilities for living could harmoniously merge with the old, like new branches shooting from a tree, and if only new knowledge and new experiences could attach to the old without conflicts and violent breaks, then our existence would truly be ideal. It was this kind of ideal existence that Ruskin and Morris established as the only viable goal for human agency.

Mechanical, industrial production violated nature, which is our greatest source of health and happiness, and it violated human dignity by forcing craftsmen and workers to work under humiliating conditions to produce goods that, first of all, did not deserve to even be put into production, because they were, first, ugly, useless, and unnecessary and, second, were made in such a poor quality and out of such bad materials that they were often broken almost before they came into use.

According to the industrialists, the products of mechanical production were made to serve one purpose only—to create profit. Therefore, to attain a healthy, natural, human existence, all mechanical, industrial production would have to be eradicated and the manufacture of unnecessary goods banned. In order to make sure that everything produced was harmonious and beautiful, it had to be established that everything was made in the same style. This style could only be the most versatile and harmonious style known, namely *the Gothic*, and in order to secure a high quality of production the medieval guild system would have to be revived.

Here we clearly recognize the demands that modern functionalism poses to industrial production, of *rational* solutions for the manufacture of *useful* objects, since by rationality what is meant is the highest use value or effectiveness achieved by the simplest solutions and the most economic means. By "useful objects" is understood those things that enhance and deepen the inner harmony of humans, our contact to nature and the elements that surround us, and further social harmony between men.

—Translation by Karen Kurczynski and Niels Henriksen



Asger Jorn and Guy Debord.
Fin de Copenhague. *1957.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

"Dear Friends"

ASGER JORN

This letter from Jorn to Otto Permild and Bjørn Rosengreen concerns the printing of Mémoires, *an artist book with text-image collages by Guy Debord and dripped markings by Asger Jorn.*[1] *The letter gives directions for the color scheme of Jorn's "structures," produced by pouring an agent directly onto the lithographic plate. It also reveals his vision for the distribution of the book. Karen Kurczynski discusses* Mémoires *in relation to Jorn's history painting* Stalingrad *elsewhere in this issue.*

—Niels Henriksen

Friday, February 15, 1958

Dear Friends,

Finally, our excellent novel is ready to go to print. We are sending it along with this letter.

It should add up to a book of 64 pages. It is made entirely from prefabricated elements, and the intention was that it should be finished without us having anything to do with it—so total industrialization.

The intention is for the colors to be as glaring and incoherent as possible, primarily dark colors, hot violet, azure, venom green, and with two reds, one cold and one warm, going down the middle of all the pages.

There are only a few inversions of text and structure; otherwise all the structures will be in color and all the text in black. Then there are a couple of structures that should be done in negative. Otherwise it should all be very straightforward. These are marked on the pages.

The intention is for the book to be printed without margins. If the two sheets, black and color, do not match precisely in size they should be leveled from the top left corner.

The paper used in *Fin de Copenhague* is excellent. We need a thousand copies

1. The letter is in the Jorn Archive, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, *Mémoires: Structures portantes d'Asger Jorn* (Copenhagen: Permild and Rosengreen, 1958/1959).

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and you can print as many as you would like in addition to that. Even if you print ten thousand. Of our one thousand copies we want 250 bound and numbered. If you want to raise this number, you can. The rest of the thousand we would ask to have bound in asphalt paper with the sticky side out. It should be slightly uncomfortable to the touch but durable. You can check whether you stock asphalt paper as coarse as the attached sample; otherwise we will have to send some for you. Perhaps it should be glued onto cardboard? On top of this cover we wanted to have a transparent dust jacket in plastic. This should be bound with a square back.

We are preparing a huge exhibition for the middle of April here in Paris. I suppose it will all be printed by then. We are looking forward to this with great anticipation. This new book will not only be a technical innovation. It also has a literary significance proportionate to the technological, which will allow us to achieve a literary-artistic effect that is bound to trigger a small earthquake here in Paris. I do not know if you realize how close we are coming to an entirely new understanding of the book. The two books we are making here together will become focal points for this renewal. Books printed in offset are not an entirely new phenomenon, but up until now they have been made to imitate Gutenbergian books. The new freedom offered by this technology will bring us closer in a certain way to medieval manuscripts as well as to the cartoons of Walt Disney, with one essential difference, which I implore you to observe, that this publication is neither for minors nor for priests.

—Translation by Niels Henriksen

Postscript to *12th-Century Stone Sculptures of Scania*

ASGER JORN

Jorn's "Postscript" first appeared in 1965 in Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet, *a book comprising a 300-page "essay" of black-and-white photographs by Gerard Franceschi arranged by Jorn.*[1] Skånes Stenskulptur *was published privately with the aim of promoting the publication of twenty-eight volumes devoted to "10,000 Years of Nordic Art." Only six were ever published, and only one,* Skånes Stenskulptur, *during Jorn's lifetime. The project was conceived by the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism, a research institute founded by Jorn. In the text, Jorn lays out the primary objectives of the publication scheme, distinguishing between "historical" and "archaeological" approaches. The text also shows the slippage of Jorn's concept of "the Nordic" from a critique of cosmopolitan internationalism to an aesthetic and philosophical ideal. The essay by Stephen Harris in this issue address Jorn's engagement with art history and medieval iconography.*

—*Niels Henriksen*

Good art is always national.
National art is always bad.
—Harald Giersing[2]

Just as the borders of the old civilizations are breaking down today to make room for a world culture, something similar is happening in art. While previously focused exclusively on European art and a European concept of art, what is called the modern movement in art has opened up to a universal concept of art pointing to a world art, and to this degree one is tempted to extend Giersing's argument and conclude that good art is always universal and universal art is always bad. The latter points to a kind of cosmopolitanism that deliberately asserts itself as universal.

1. Asger Jorn, *Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet* (Copenhagen: privately published, 1965). A new edition of *Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet* including the postscript was issued in 1995; see Asger Jorn and Erik Cinthio, *Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet* (Valby: Borgen, 1995).
2. Harald Giersing, "Aforismer," *Klingen* 2 (November 1917). Harald Giersing (1881–1927) was a Danish modernist painter and writer.

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If Nordic art were entirely European, this series of art books would have been published long ago. However, as it stands, Nordic art has a double character, which is both European and not European. The difficulty lies in clarifying its relationship to the European part of its character on one hand, and the universal part of its character on the other. Should one choose the European concept of art as a standard of value, this art will only appear to be a secondary, peripheral derivation of an artistic development, the center of which originates in the Mediterranean region. This has already been tried out with little success. But should one choose the opposite route, and argue for a completely isolated and totally independent Nordic evolution of art, then it would be at best reduced to a meager display, and at worst constitute a perpetrated fraud. We have to maintain the tension among the universal, the Nordic, and the European throughout our categories of description, and it is this difficult task that I hope to carry out in the present work, thus fulfilling its aspirations of making a contribution to world art.

When one seeks to definitively chart the object of one's study, it is necessary to use instruments of the greatest precision. Descriptive terms are these instruments. In order to be precise the terms have to be consistent with a definitive meaning, what one calls a concept. So for the sake of a good result we have to clarify certain concepts that are fundamental to our work by testing their definitions at the most extreme.

Our understanding of art, which we have inherited from the Latin-European cultural sphere and which until one hundred years ago was exclusively dominated by it is similar to our understanding of political, social, and cultural phenomena, founded as it is on literary historicism. Classical history in the strictest sense, and this applies to art history as well, bases its examination on contemporary records of historical events in relation to which the historical subject is explained. As a consequence the historical subject is not only bound to certain events but also explained according to places and moments and to the perspective from which contemporary history writing has taken place. Until Saxo Grammaticus wrote his Danish history—in Latin, of course—it was only the Greeks and the Romans who had written histories, including those of Scandinavia.[3]

As long as one uses those histories as the foundation for a Nordic history of art, then Nordic art will present itself as a provincial and meaningless derivation of southeastern European and Middle Eastern art-historical currents, without active influence on the general development of art in Europe. However, the concept of provincialism has absolutely no meaning if one does not agree that the valuable in art at each moment radiates out from designated centers. The fact that such centers exist, and can be made the basis of a coherent account of various

3. Saxo Grammaticus (1150–1220) was the author of the first full history of Denmark, *Gesta Danorum*; see Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979).

developments in art, does not exclude the fact that other modes of description are possible and productive.

No one could imagine calling the art of the South Sea Islands provincial. In its precise definition this word would denote a peripheral activity that is nevertheless part of a centralized economic, technical, and social unity, of a state like the Roman state. The difference here is clear between provincial Roman art and Nordic art of the migration period.

In the last century nationalism was reinstated as a countermeasure to the perceived provincialism in Europe, and as a standard of value in art. This shift towards the national state, however, only transferred the disparity between capital and province into the framework of the national. It is symptomatic for Scandinavia that the most universally minded artists and writers of this period defined themselves more and more in opposition to their respective capitals. It is in this intellectual nativist movement, which abolished the difference between the national and the European, that the present work has its richly elaborated foundations.

The classic mode of history writing must give up where there are no literary sources in relation to which it can develop its chosen subject. Given that almost the entire area that we seek to engage here is, strictly speaking, ahistorical, it is necessary to engage it by means of completely different principles, methods, and ways of structuring the material. Over the course of the last hundred years these methods and ways of structuring have been collected into a scientific discipline that is called archaeology. The literary mode of history writing explains relics of the past according to the written sources. Archaeology writes its history directly from conclusions based on the inner logic of the remains of the past themselves, and in this way reverses the order of the interplay. History writing is a hybrid between art and science. Archaeology cannot allow itself to become that. On the other hand, archaeology remains hypothetical in the way that it arranges phenomena, while the literary mode of history writing allows itself to make claims and state conclusions, even if it acknowledges that these reflect the interests that lie behind the desire to preserve an account of a specific event seen through a particular lens. Once the archaeological researchers agree on the authenticity of a find, if that is then at odds with the written accounts, then the latter will be considered false or distorted, because the object does not have the same ability to lie as does the word.

Actions and events are the nodal points of literary history. However, these can never attain any clear archaeological meaning. Archaeological research can precisely determine time, place, and other characteristics, but on its own it is an eventless shadow land. The arbitrary connection to literary history writing places Nordic art in a peculiar half-light where fragments will surface here and there with the observer left to imagine the rest. Those are the conditions under which these publications will have to be compiled.

The coherence that archaeology can bring to the fore is based on the study of the development of the most ordinary types, that is, on the homogeneity and variation of repetitions. By means of this material chronological order as well as

geographical movements can be described and collected in stratigraphic overviews. Where an object cannot be inserted into such a traditional course it must be marked an archaeological alien element, until the context wherein in fits naturally has been found.

Unfortunately, artistic experience, which is necessarily the concern of art books, can be only of limited interest to the main subject of archaeology. Indeed, since artistic experience is specific to the encounter between the distinctive and the extraordinary, the archaeological focus could even be a distraction in the way it relies on the ordinary and the typical. As a consequence, the archaeologists that write these art books are forced to place themselves outside their main area of focus, in order to give us exactly the information we need for purely artistic reasons.

Archaeologists arrange their own material in order to attain and clarify the understanding of a deeper historical logic. Naturally, this cannot be the purpose of art books, which must seek to emphasize the special artistic value and essential character of the individual object.

When I dare to make these exceptional demands of Nordic archaeologists with a reasonably good conscience, it is out of pride of the knowledge that there already exists such an extensive archaeological literature produced by the labor of the Nordic experts in our field. This makes it generally possible for them to cater to the desire for a knowledge that is not directly bound to the distinctly archaeological methodology.

Instead of contriving a fictive art history in literary fashion, we aim for synthesis through collaborative combination of the distinct elements of a purely artistic treatment of the subject in poetry, selection of images and layout, and a text entirely grounded in science.

Those repetitive, tradition-bound patterns, which as a rule are called culture, turn into an unbearable emptiness and a uniform routine if they are not countered by art's rich variety. The inherently antithetical relationship between art and culture creates the latent tension in the material that we have before us here. This tension was neutralized in the Greco-Roman cultural sphere, and the foundations for the civilization of modern industrial cities were laid when the connection was severed between the standardized stereotypy of practical production and the work of art. By the same token the work of art was sequestered. Out of this undertaking came the classical aesthetic, which conceived the work of art in splendid "isolation" as an autonomous formal unity. This aesthetic, too, is inapplicable as a measure of Nordic art, in which art is integrated into social, practical, and human functions as a sort of spiritual/intellectual [*åndelig*] accompaniment to life. That is why the account of a work of art can never be completely divorced from the typological, the traditional, and the functional if it is to be truthful.

The breakthrough of industrialization in the beginning of the last century was advanced by the classical aesthetic, which has to an increasing degree isolated the world of art from practical and technological evolution. It appears to me, however, that this process has reached such a degree of completion that it is now

possible for one to appreciate art forms with a more intimate attachment to life without thereby risking an attack on the autonomy of art. A way of presenting the problem that sets one or the other of these art forms as either the higher or the lower seems today rather useless. It will only answer questions that are as absurd as the problem of whether an hour is of greater value than a meter. Instead of a traditional hierarchy of value, which is produced in this specific context by superficial simplification that does neither art nor artistic experience any good, it would be enriching if one could measure art according to the standards by which it has measured itself.

The archaeological method pursued in this series of books is not a reflection of a special partiality to tradition in art, but a purely objective recognition that this is the only scientific discipline that can provide a foundation for the exploration of this more or less ahistorical art. If the Nordic evolution of art lends itself to an explanation through archaeological typology, and it is Nordic research that has established the basic elements of this science, then this is first and foremost due to the fact that Scandinavia has never had a provincial status in relation to great foreign powers, nor since the Stone Age has it ever been ruled by emigrating populations that could have caused new and more complex social changes.

This is due, again, to the land being new and inhospitable, emerging from the ice cap only ten thousand years ago, and it should be acknowledged as the youngest land with the most ancient populace in Europe. As much havoc as the Scandinavians are said to have caused in the historical development of other countries, life in this harsh climate, from which such a flood of people dispersed that Tacitus referred to it as the womb of humanity, seems to have passed quietly and undramatically by comparison to the great changes taking place elsewhere. It is this barbarian perception of the Nordic peoples that we will seek to change through this work.

The remarkably close connections between art and culture in Scandinavia have resulted in what could be described as a high artistic tradition, a great appreciation for art. This is evident from the many art objects of smaller scale that have been brought home from abroad by traveling folk in prehistoric times, among which even a Chinese Buddha figure has been found. The overwhelming amount of domestic artistic relics that have been preserved and protected in Scandinavia, among which the examples in this book series constitute only a fragment, must be explained in a similar way. However, just as easily as one can underestimate the artistic culture, one can overestimate it, as is so often the case particularly in Scandinavia and the United States, because the artistic culture is actually of no concern to the creative artist or to the artistic process of creation. Artistic culture is exclusively about the cultivation of discrimination in the enjoyment of art and of the demands for art, but it is unproductive for, and indeed can even be hostile to, artistic renewal of all sorts. The artistic culture of Scandinavia can therefore only with great difficulty find its expression through the artistic process of creation. The popular legend of the artist troll Finn originates in ancient Nordic

mythology and describes a typical situation in the evolution of art in Scandinavia.[4] Whether this is actually a shortcoming or an advantage will here be left unsaid. The great effort that northern European scientists and collectors have devoted to uncovering the art of the Mediterranean is in any case an extremely positive effect of this love for art.

Whether an art-historical position is formalist, as in the principles of Lionello Venturi, or symbolist, as in the iconology of Erwin Panofsky, unfortunately it always ends in an attack on contemporary art. Contemporary art does not conform to the normative values that history has established for looking at the past, which are seen by many as eternally valid. Some even call them objective.

It appears to me a logical conclusion that a philosophy of art that systematically refuses to acknowledge the value of contemporary art, in order to fortify its position, reveals an error of judgment, or a limitation, that has to affect even the material that this theory values the most.

If my aspirations are not proven false, a progressive development of the Nordic philosophy of art, as it gradually emerges with the publication of this series of books, will fill the gap in the description of art that these two excellent theorists have been forced to leave open, in order that each might be able to shape his discipline within the framework of a coherent logic. As a point of departure for this third complementary approach to art, I intend to use the reflections of the Danish art historian Julius Lange.[5] Through this supplement to the theory of art, I hope also to reach a theoretical affirmation of the free artistic practices as they unfold today and into the future, and to achieve a concretization of the endeavors through which Whistler, in his time, cultivated the modern development of art.[6]

A break in the evolution of art appeared when we reached the phenomenon commonly called modern art, which first entirely and fully broke through with Whistler and the Impressionists. From the conviction that art has its purpose in itself and nothing but itself, art was established as an autonomous enterprise freed from serving social, political, historical, scientific, and technical functions.

Up until now, what has been emphasized about this shift has been the emancipation of either the work of art as an autonomous object or the artist as an

4. According to myth, the monk Saint Laurentius hoaxed the giant Finn into building the cathedral of Lund in southern Sweden.

5. Julius Lange (1838–1896) was an art historian. Part of the sequence of plates in *Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet* was guided by Lange's principles, meaning that the plates in this subsection were categorized according to pagan iconographical motifs, as, for instance, "beardpullers." See Asger Jorn, *Skånes Stenskulptur*, dust jacket; and Julius Lange, "Om Kunstværdi," in *Nordens Teoretiske Æstetik*, ed. Asger Jorn (Valby: Borgens Forlag, 1967).

6. The use of a well-known quote in *Held og Hasard* (Luck and Chance) (1952/63) points to James Abbott McNeill Whistler's early articulation of an antagonistic, modern avant-garde position: "The English painter, Whistler, has aptly called the art of aesthetics 'the noble art of making enemies.' Thus to create aesthetic art is to sow enmity, strife and rivalry, to create effects of difference." See Asger Jorn, *Held og Hasard* (Silkeborg: Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme, 1963), p. 95.

independent personality. However, it seems to me that both these emancipatory projects will only lead to the isolation and increasing estrangement of art and the artist, where the content of art is reduced to an empty play with formal techniques or to the tragic fate of the individual, unless a third aspect of this emancipation is underlined. This, however, requires the ability to differentiate between that which is called the purpose [*formål*] and that which is the end goal [*endemål*]. If art constitutes its own end, it will never have a purpose to strive for, not even in itself. However, even if art does not have a purpose in itself, that does not prevent many nonartistic enterprises from pursuing their purposes through art.

To say not only that art has its end in itself but also that, ultimately, it is the end goal, if not purpose, of all human enterprise is merely to express the evident fact embodied in the saying *ars longa, vita brevis*. If art becomes the purpose of life, the meaning of life is reduced to the preparation of immortal memorials. Whereas if one, in accordance with Johannes Holbek, understands art as an attitude to life, then art in itself will entail a demand for life, then art will become that which is described in "Den Højes Tale"—a memory that never dies.[7] This means that the work of art in the Nordic understanding is a form of life, and thus at the same time a form that will only reveal its truth in the moment when it has engulfed the life that has created it, which therefore prevents an artistic development from being evaluated until it has come to a stop and found its completion. Nowhere in the world does one find the artistic process regarded with such a respectful and absolutely neutral attitude of anticipation as in Scandinavia. Whether it involves a gift buried in the darkness of the swamp, or presented on a hillock as in the most ancient times, or produced in a modern environment, it will therefore take the shape of an irrevocable sacrifice. That sacrifice can never be accounted for. It is a meaningless surprise for which we have no better phrase than the gift of mercy, which in its heavy and inelegant way expresses what southern levity unifies in the concept of grace. There has to be three of them. We already know the two. We have now embarked on the hunt for the third.

—Translated by Niels Henriksen

7. Johannes Holbek (1872–1903) was a Danish illustrator, Symbolist painter, and writer. In "Den Højes Tale," Hávamál is the speech of Odin, the Nordic God and ruler of Asgaard; see *The Poetic Edda* 1 and 2, ed. and trans. Ursula Dronke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).



Asger Jorn. Poussin. *1962.*
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Structuralism and Suppression

ASGER JORN

The title of this essay, "Strukturalisme og Fortielse," is typical of Jorn's tendency to pair different though not necessarily antithetical terms.[1] *The Danish word* fortielse *can be rendered as "suppression" or "concealment," and structuralism in Jorn's view suppresses or conceals 1) possibilities other than those structuralism can construct as relations of paired opposites, and 2) the human being, who is excluded from structuralism's attempt to imagine its object of inquiry as a science. Both of these suppressions are seen as shortcomings as well as consequences of structuralism's logical operations. Jorn frequently introduces Nordic thinkers into his discourse, for, as he makes clear in the early pages of* The Natural Order *and elsewhere, in his view Nordic thought is qualitatively different from Latin and Slavic modes of thought.*[2] *Here he puts renowned Danish physicist Niels Bohr's theory of complementarity forward as a supplement and alternative to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. For Jorn, there is a fundamental contradiction between a structuralism that defines itself as an archaeology—archaeology is not for Jorn a discipline principally concerned with language—and the linguistics on which structuralist method is founded. (Jorn seems to be thinking of Michel Foucault's early writings, since he alludes to* Les Mots et les choses.*) With this contradiction in mind, he calls upon the Swedish architect Erik Lundberg's concept of the "language of form" to counter structuralism's reliance on a linguistic formalism, and proposes the mathematical knots of topology and the interlacing of Nordic decorative patterning as instances of ways of thinking that are independent of language—that are, in other words, a formal "language" without language. Structuralism is thus seen to be restricted in its scope and its reasoning, despite its claims to universality.*

—Steven Harris

Now that existentialism has exhausted itself, the big new catchword in intellectual circles in Paris is structuralism. What is structuralism? It is a method, an instrument, and the purpose of this instrument is to dissolve the conflict between

1. Asger Jorn, "Strukturalisme og Fortielse," *Kriterium* 2, no. 4 (September 1967), pp. 6–8.
2. Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order/De Divisione Naturae: The Silkeborg Interpretation versus the Copenhagen Interpretation* (1962), trans. Peter Shield, in Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 14–16. Originally published in Danish as Report no. 1 of the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism. This book is largely a critique of Niels Bohr's theory of complementarity, although Jorn posits Bohr's theory as an alternative to structuralism in "Structuralism and Suppression."

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the humanities and the natural sciences, by subordinating the humanities to the mathematical structuring of the natural sciences and making them more exact. In order to achieve this goal a principle has to be introduced, which has not yet found its mathematical formulation even though the absence of this principle, especially within the field of physics, has been felt more and more strongly over the past hundred years. This is *the formula for a correlation of contrasts*: x is the complete contrast to y, since arithmetic and mathematics until now have only been able to work in equations, establishing whether x is equivalent or not equivalent to y. In other words, whether x is *symmetric* with y. The method of mathematics is noncontradictory. The relation of contrasts, which Pasteur among others framed as *dissymmetry*, explains that black, for instance, is the contrast to white, big is the contrast to small, etc.[3] The entire theory of structuralism has been built on the basis of the allegedly "objective" scientific character of these contrasts.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, concludes an article on "Le Triangle culinaire": "Thus we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language through which it unconsciously translates its structure—or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions."[4] In order to stay within the strictly *linguistic* framework of logic, he replaces the concept of contrast with the concept of *contradiction*. This is exactly what characterizes structuralism: the way it confines itself strictly within *the framework of symbolic logic*. In this way, its method becomes a continuation of the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap. With all descriptions structured as *a continuous net of contradictions* they are freed from being assigned to the division between mathematical and empirical truth.

I have emphasized before that contradistinction really does play a fundamental role in our descriptions, but I find it impossible to claim that the Lévi-Strauss triangle is a structural formula of objective and scientific validity. It is impossible because in order for a person to be able to understand something, *it is necessary, for psychological reasons, to draw up contrasts*, meaning *two-sided contrasts*, though these same contrasts, *objectively seen, are always three-sided*.[5] In order to draw up the necessary two-sided contrast, the human being is always forced to disregard the third side. When Lévi-Strauss thinks someone is unconsciously refraining from the disclosure of his contradictions—this also goes for himself, yes—*anyone who puts forward a contrast and holds fast to it thereby conceals or overlooks two other contrasts which, if they were brought to light, would dissolve the contrast put forward initially.* This is the fundamental cognitive consequence of Niels Bohr's observation of

3. Chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur proposed that biological molecules are asymmetric because the physical forces presiding over their formation, for instance time, are themselves asymmetric.
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," trans. Peter Brooks, *Partisan Review* 33, no. 4 (Fall 1966), p. 595; first published in French in *L'Arc* 26 (1965); repr. in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 36–43.
5. Jorn developed his theory of triolectics in dialogue with Bohr's theory of complementarity in *The Natural Order*.

complementarity, and reading Lévi-Strauss, one soon discovers that he is leading a hopeless struggle against these possible *complementarities of contradiction.*

When the natural sciences made their real breakthrough by setting up the relationship of contrast between mathematics and empiricism, they had to exclude *the human*, relegating it to a reservation called the humanities. If the natural sciences are now also to invade this territory, it will be necessary to abolish the hodgepodge of the so-called "human sciences." This is what the structuralists have done (e.g., *Les Mots et les choses*) in *excluding the human being* by claiming it was nothing other than an invention of the natural sciences that is no longer needed. *The human being is that which the structuralists are compelled not to discuss*, if they are to structure the human sciences. I have nothing against drawing up a necessary premise for the development of a rational systematization as long as one does this consciously and openly, meaning that one acknowledges that it will preclude other possible modes of structuring that can be precisely just as legitimate, unless one demands a *blind faith in the system.*

At no time has the Nordic cultural sphere been as involved in the intellectual problems of a period as it is in the division between existentialism and structuralism. Nordic thinking forms the conscious starting point and prerequisite for this discussion. The existentialists invoke Søren Kierkegaard as their point of departure and the structuralists Carl Linné and Hjelmslev—all this, however, with such great modifications that there is barely anything left of the original. When I first put forward my *triple complementarity principle*, I approached Niels Bohr for a statement on its general validity and Hjelmslev for his opinion of my theory of semantic complementarity. The last question concerned first and foremost the complementarity between unilateral communication, or what the semanticists call *idiolectics*, and real communication or *dialectics*, which logical semantics or linguistics are compelled to disregard by calling all semantics communication. Unfortunately this only happened shortly before they both died, and I did not obtain any conclusive answers. I then approached the eminent exponent of symbolic logic Professor Arne Næss in Norway, who would be the one best capable of cutting through the misuse of the concept of the symbolic running through, for instance, the work of Jung. This too has been fruitless.[6]

The division between existentialists and structuralists has found its expression in the contrast *between historical and archaeological methods. Structuralism defines itself as a general archaeology.* In my postscript to the book on stone sculptures of Scania in the twelfth century, I laid out a program for an attempt to elevate this

6. Influenced by pragmatism and the logical empiricism of the Vienna School, Norwegian philosopher Arne Dekke Elde Næss (1912–2009) went on to become a founder of deep ecology. Jorn could either be referring to Næss's major philosophical work of the 1950s: Arne Næss, *Interpretation and Preciseness* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1953); or to one of Næss's popular introductions to philosophy published in the early 1960s, for instance, Arne Næss, *Filosofiens historie: En indføring i filosofiske problemer* (Copenhagen: Vinten, 1963).

question above the current stagnation in the historical conflict by emphasizing the archaeological method.[7] At the same time, the publication of the series "10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art" should be *a historic event in itself*, in the most proper sense of the term, meaning *a temporally limited phenomenon* that could soon be replaced by another series, composed in a different way. At the time the premise was the misconceived humanism of existentialism. Today we find ourselves at the opposite extreme where no artist has even a spark of existence. The project was a failure, but this did not prevent it from becoming, as failure, a magnificent *historical* event.

A province is a peripheral part of a greater territory sharing the same administration. The provincialists in Denmark currently seem to be in the majority. Consequently, the admission of Denmark into the European political union will probably become a reality. Since I am a realist, I will submit to this reality should it happen, and since I have never been a provincialist but continue to be a humanist and not a structuralist, my one remaining duty will be to further my artistic work as much as possible and seek out the conditions that appear to me to be best suited for this purpose. I had hoped for the opposite outcome, and have done what was in my power to push in this direction; however, I am not among those who take pleasure in destroying according to the attitude: if I am not allowed to do as I please I will definitely make sure the ones who prevent me from doing so will not be able to do as they please either. The aesthetic lies in the ability to rearrange one's desires, in wanting so many things that not all of one's desires need to be fulfilled, because the fulfillment of desires does not mean they mutually exclude each other's realization, the way one thought drives away another.

*

The contradiction in the linguistic archaeology that calls itself structuralism lies in the fact that the concept of *archaeology*, while intimately connected to the concept of *architecture*, is totally independent of literary methodology, and precisely through its relation to architecture it reveals, for instance, the comprehensive codifications of visual art and geometry, which have nothing whatsoever to do with linguistics. Precisely a new mathematical development like topology or *Analysis Situs* demonstrates clearly complementary procedures in the composition of the same individual elements, as in the relationship between the structural methods of interlinking, interlacing, and coiling. A typical example of a duly interlinked structuring of thought can, incidentally, be found in Professor O. Kofoed-Hansen's article "Concerning Efficiency."[8] The joke is that such a structur-

7. See translation of Asger Jorn, "Postscript," in this issue, originally published in Asger Jorn and Erik Cinthio, *Skånes Stenskulptur på 1100 tallet* (Copenhagen: privately printed, 1965; reeditioned, Valby: Borgen, 1995). "Current stagnation in the historical conflict [*den standende historiekonflikt*]" seems to refer to an impasse in the historical process as conceived in Marxist terms.

8. The reference is to Danish physicist Otto Kofoed-Hansen, "Det gælder effektiviteten," *Berlingske Tidende* (May 11, 1967).

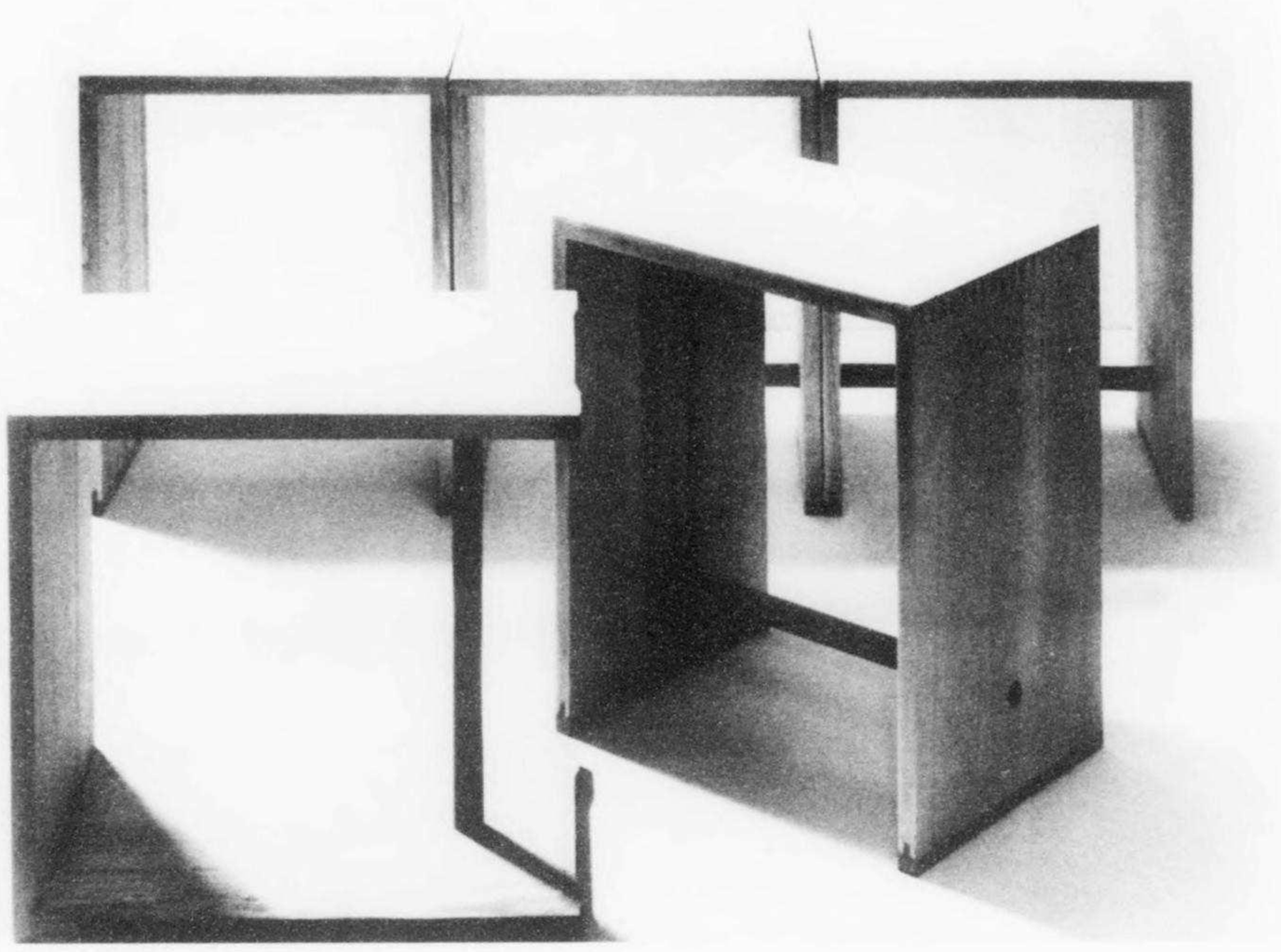
ing of thought is actually rather ineffective in Denmark, where people generally prefer weaving in and out.

Among the protests against the linguists, the argument of Pierre Francastel's book *La Figure et le lieu* carries great weight. It is comforting to read statements such as the following: "Images can be confronted with concepts and actions, but they cannot be placed above or beneath one another. They can neither replace each other nor be identified with each other. They are complementary to other human artifacts."[9] Toward a description of the visual field that lies outside both the purely formalist and the symbolic that Paul Klee, among others, has previously sought to define, the Swedish architect Erik Lundberg succeeded in initiating a study he resolved to categorize under the double concept of the *language of form*, which is neither form nor language.[10] He has compiled a condensed overview of his principles that is currently in the process of being translated into German. Sooner or later, linguistic structuralism will reveal its one-sidedness so that a confrontation becomes possible. But it might be a long time before this happens.

—Translated by Niels Henriksen

9. The original quote is: "Les images sont confrontables avec les concepts et les actes; mais elles ne leur sont pas superposables; elles ne leur sont ni substituables ni identiques. Elles sont complémentaires des autres œuvres de l'homme." Pierre Francastel, *La Figure et le lieu: L'ordre visuel du Quattrocento* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 349. This section of Francastel's argument did not make it into the revised English translation, Pierre Francastel, *20,000 Years of World Painting* (New York: Dell, 1967).

10. Erik Lundberg (1895–1969) was a Swedish art historian and architect. Between 1945 and 1961 Lundberg published a history of architecture in ten volumes covering antiquity to the present under the title *Language of Form in Architecture: Studies in the Artistic Properties of Architecture in Their Historical Development*; see Erik Lundberg, *Arkitekturens Formspråk: Studier over arkitekturens konstnärliga värden i deras historiska utveckling* (Stockholm: Nordisk Rotogravyr, 1945–1961).



Max Bill, Hans Gugelot, and Paul Hildinger. Ulm Stools. Photograph by Ernst Hahn. 1954. Courtesy of the HfG Archive, Ulm.

Bauhaus Ideas: Jorn, Max Bill, and Reconstruction Culture*

NICOLA PEZOLET

Asger Jorn's anthology *Pour la forme: Ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts* marked the conclusion of several years of research and polemics on art, architecture, and urbanism.[1] Published in Paris in July of 1958—a year after the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB) merged with other groups to form the Situationist International (SI)—the book originated in one of Jorn's polemical interventions within the architectural discipline. More specifically it arose from his confrontation with the Swiss artist, architect, and industrial designer Max Bill, then-rector of the Ulm School of Design (*Hochschule für Gestaltung*, HfG). While their spirited debate was originally focused on the meaning and legacies of the Bauhaus, which Bill had attended in Dessau between 1924 and 1927, it eventually turned into a discussion about the place of modern artists amid the unprecedented technological and environmental changes brought about by the postwar capitalist reconstruction. On behalf of artists worldwide, Jorn asked, "Can we retain freedom and experimental desire under the new historical conditions?"[2]

* Many thanks to the other contributors to this issue for their invitation to speak and write about Asger Jorn, as well as for their precious help and comments. I also wish to thank Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and his graduate students for the opportunity to join their semnars on postwar European art at Harvard. For their unfaltering support and their insights at different moments of my research, I wish to thank Laurent Stalder (ETHZ/gta), Caroline A. Jones (MIT/HTC), Romy Golan (CUNY Graduate Center), and Ara Merjian (NYU). Thank you, finally, to Aurora E. Robinson and Ana Maria León.

1. Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts* (Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1958); reprinted as Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme* (Paris: Allia, 2001). The reprint is used here for page references. The title of this particular book, recently published in English by Peter Shields as *Concerning Form* (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2012), is difficult to translate without losing the intended play on the words *pour la forme*. The French expression *pour la forme* means "just for the sake of it." In a way, Jorn may be suggesting that his artistic practice and his theorizing of art and society are essentially playful activities. The title could also be translated as "in favor of form," indicating the free exploration of formal and artistic questions. The subtitle could be translated as "outline for a methodology of the arts," giving the title a pseudo-academic mock pretentiousness, or as "sketch of a methodology of the arts," alluding to Paul Klee's 1925 Bauhaus book *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Pedagogical Sketchbook) in which text and images are dynamically intermeshed, as they are in Jorn's book.

2. Asger Jorn, "Against Functionalism," in *Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn's Writings on Art and Architecture*, ed. Ruth Baumeister, trans. Paul Larkin (Rotterdam: 010, 2011), p. 273.

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Cover of Asger Jorn's Pour la Forme: Ébauche d'une Méthodologie des Arts. *1958.*

I wish to retrace Jorn's encounter with the Bauhaus (as well as with other artistic movements of the interwar years, in particular Surrealism) and chronicle the cultural context of the postwar debates over modern design that led him to establish the guidelines for his "counter-functionalist" theory of form. It would exceed the limits of this essay to offer a comprehensive discussion of Jorn's aesthetic writings from the 1950s, which deal with a myriad of subjects and operate simultaneously on different registers and often at cross-purposes. Therefore, I will focus on presenting Jorn's notion of counter-functionalism, which formed the basis of the Imaginist Bauhaus's program for the democratic artistic education and ludic technological experimentation outlined in *Pour la forme.*[3]

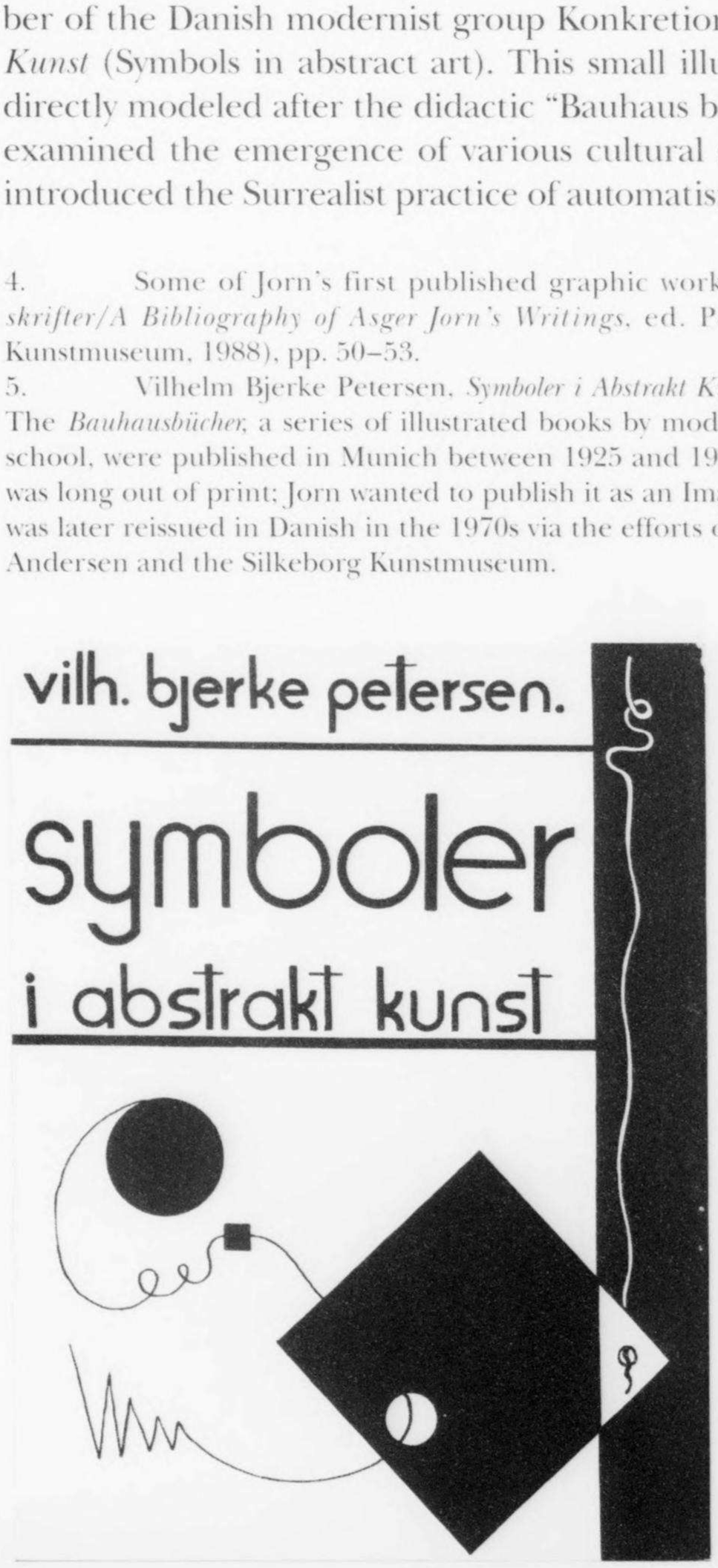
As early as the 1930s, Jorn's understanding of the role of art was inextricable from his left-wing political engagement and his desire to develop collective forms of cultural creation linked to an emancipatory project of popular education. Having joined the Communist movement in his twenties following his encounter with the trade unionist Christian Christensen, Jorn chose to publish some of his first woodcuts and lithographs, evocative of the expressionistic graphic work of George Grosz

3. A more in-depth discussion of Jorn's writings on architecture can be found in Nicola Pezolet, "Le Bauhaus Imaginiste contre un Bauhaus Imaginaire" (M.A. thesis, Université Laval, 2008). See also Ruth Baumeister, "'De l'architecture sauvage': Asger Jorns Kritik und Konzept der Modernen Architektur" (Ph.D. dissertation, TU Delft, 2009).

and Edvard Munch, in small leftist magazines that supported local labor struggles.[4] In 1935, he also produced a large socialist mural on paper, which was shown at a Mardi Gras fair held at his college in Silkeborg, where he was born, a small provincial town in central Jutland that was fairly isolated from the major artistic debates of the day. Jorn nevertheless encountered artists and architects in Copenhagen who had connections to the European avant-garde via the Bauhaus. He met with two alumni, architect and Communist militant Edvard Heiberg and painter Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen. Bjerke Petersen was a former pupil of Vassily Kandinsky, a founding member of the Danish modernist group Konkretion, and the author of *Symboler i Abstrakt Kunst* (Symbols in abstract art). This small illustrated book, published in 1933, was directly modeled after the didactic "Bauhaus books" of Kandinsky and Paul Klee and examined the emergence of various cultural symbols in abstract art forms.[5] It also introduced the Surrealist practice of automatism to a Scandinavian audience.

4. Some of Jorn's first published graphic works can be found in *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter/A Bibliography of Asger Jorn's Writings*, ed. Per Hofman Hansen (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1988), pp. 50–53.

5. Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, *Symboler i Abstrakt Kunst* (Copenhagen: Illums Bogafdeling, 1933). The *Bauhausbücher*, a series of illustrated books by modernist artists and architects affiliated with the school, were published in Munich between 1925 and 1929. Bjerke Petersen's similarly conceived book was long out of print; Jorn wanted to publish it as an Imaginist Bauhaus book, but the project failed. It was later reissued in Danish in the 1970s via the efforts of the art historian and Jorn biographer Troels Andersen and the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum.



Cover of Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen's Symboler i Abstrakt Kunst. *1933.*

It was through his exposure to Petersen and journals like *Linien* (The Line) that Jorn developed his singular understanding of the Bauhaus. Based on the information available to him in Denmark, Jorn imagined this school as a community opposed to bourgeois values, dedicated simultaneously to theoretical and artistic experimentation, the development of alternative lifestyles, and political activism. Jorn also thought of the Bauhaus as an internationalist network that fostered the conditions for a vast cross-pollination of progressive artistic tendencies and pedagogical methods, as the school welcomed educators from diverse countries and backgrounds. He always focused more on the Bauhaus as a multifaceted experimental artistic center, as opposed to a market-oriented trade school that fostered collaboration among architects, abstract artists, and product designers working toward a democratic mass distribution of the amenities of consumption.[6]

When Jorn chose to abandon his job as a teacher in the fall of 1936 and left Denmark to devote himself fully to becoming an artist, the Bauhaus, to his great disappointment, had already been closed down by the Nazis. Still hoping to work under the tutelage of Kandinsky, Jorn left for Paris, where the Russian artist was living after he fled Germany. Since the aging Kandinsky was no longer accepting pupils, Jorn chose to attend Fernand Léger's Académie d'Art Contemporain instead. Jorn was sympathetic to Léger's populism and *bon vivant* manner, describing the artist, who famously wore a cap and blue-collar clothes in his studio, as very keen on having frequent visitors and listening to their ideas "regardless of whether the interlocutor is a fellow artist or a worker from a Renault factory."[7]

In those years Léger's work was oriented toward mural painting. In the 1920s Léger wrote several texts for French avant-garde periodicals in which he described the use of color as the key to vitalizing the rectangular walls of stark modernist buildings. Later, in the 1930s, amidst the enthusiasm caused by the election of the Popular Front government, and as a response to the reactionary use that right-wing groups made of mass spectacles throughout Europe, Léger also called for the development of colorful urban pageants that would make modern art an integral part of the daily life of working-class people. Léger declared: "Color is vital. It is one of life's indispensable raw materials, like water and fire. Human existence without a colorful environment is inconceivable."[8] Having

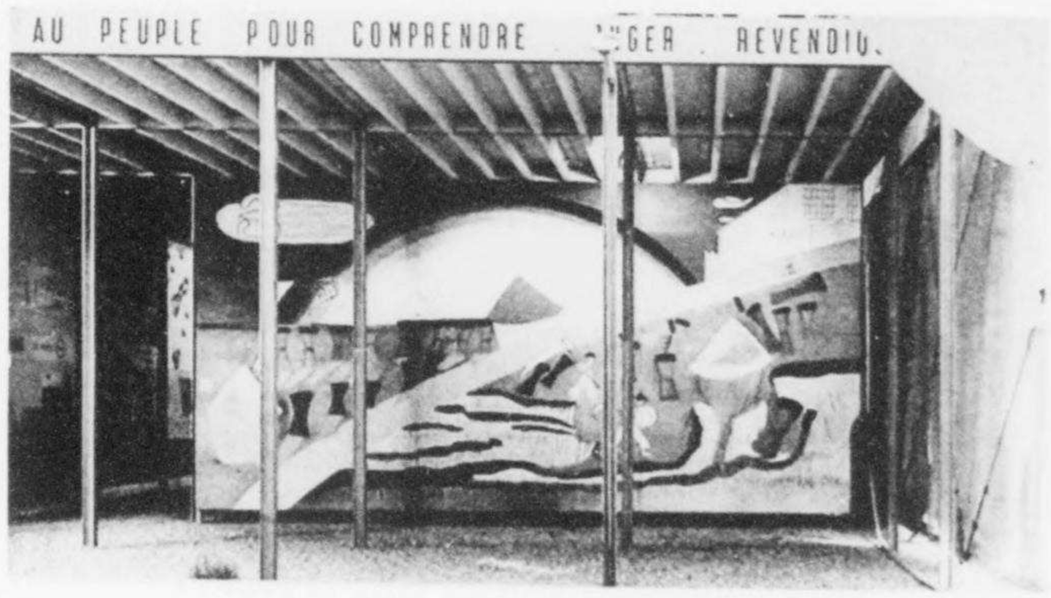
6. For instance, in all of his writings on the Bauhaus, Jorn never mentions the productivist Swiss artist and architect Hannes Meyer, second director of the Bauhaus and the figure most associated with functionalism. This may be due to the fact that for years after the school closed down, only very limited documentation on the history of the Bauhaus was available to the public, a situation that was partially remedied years later by the publication of archival material in Hans Maria Wingler, ed., *Das Bauhaus, 1919–1933: Weimar Dessau Berlin* (Cologne: Bramsche, 1962).

7. Asger Jorn, "New Painting New Architecture: Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier," in *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p. 35.

8. Fernand Léger, "Couleur dans le monde," in *Fonctions de la Peinture* (Paris: Gonthier, 1965), p. 88. My translation. Léger would develop these ideas further during the war, with his 1943 "Nine Points on Monumentality." See Sigfried Giedion, Fernand Léger, and Josep Luis Sert, "Nine Points on Monumentality," in Sigfried Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me: The Diary of a Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1958), pp. 48–52.

worked in this medium before in Silkeborg, Jorn, in programmatic essays dedicated to the issue of architectural polychromy, supported Léger's call to go beyond easel painting and to erect murals in public settings.

Jorn's first collaborative work with Léger and the academy students was for the mural *Le transport des forces* (Power transmission). Léger's wall-sized painting (five by ten meters) showed the encounter of natural and technical worlds, depicting a mountainous and verdant environment crossed by a rainbow and framed by the shimmering metallic structure of a hydroelectric station.[9] Shortly after the mural's completion, Léger would introduce Jorn to his longtime friend, the architect and artist Le Corbusier, with whom he had collaborated for over a decade. Le Corbusier commissioned Jorn to produce another mural, titled *Les Moissons* (The harvest season), for the large temporary structure known as the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, a part of the 1937 Paris World Exposition. (This mural was based on a drawing by two young students from one of Pierre Guéguen's classes, which Jorn was asked to enlarge to the size of 50 square meters.)[10] Beside the different painted murals, Le Corbusier's pavilion featured didactic wall-sized propaganda photomontages proclaiming a new era of solidarity, and social and technological progress across France's urban and rural areas.[11]



Jorn. Les Moissons. *1937.*

When Jorn returned to Denmark in 1938, he would look back on his experience at the Académie d'Art Contemporain and the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux as formative, although he would gradually try to free himself from the ideas and practices of his first mentors.[12] In a series of essays published in the 1940s, starting with "Ansigt til ansigt" (Face to face), published in the student architecture journal *A 5*, Jorn raised serious doubts about Léger's understanding that mural painting and architectural polychromy were largely subservient to architec-

9. Matthew Affron, "Léger's Modernism: Subjects and Objects," in *Fernand Léger*, ed. Carolyn Lanchner et al. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), p. 141.

10. See Danilo Udovicki-Selb, "Le Corbusier and the Paris Exhibition of 1937: The Temps Nouveaux Pavilion," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 1 (March 1997), pp. 42–63.

11. See Le Corbusier, *Des canons, des munitions . . . merci ! Des logis, s.v.p.* (Paris: Éditions de l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1938). See also Chapter 4 of Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe, 1927–1957* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

12. Jorn, "New Painting New Architecture," pp. 35–38. Léger's remarks are in italics here.

ture itself. Jorn quotes Léger: "*United discipline, along with the acceptance of mutual concessions and restraints, must be worked into all three art forms*," and comments, "This, of course, is nothing but a fraud by which Léger seeks to deceive both himself and all other artists."[13] Jorn was especially critical of Le Corbusier, denouncing his technocratic zeal and his self-serving view of artistic collaboration, which allowed little freedom to the artists he commissioned to produce murals or public sculptures within his buildings. He became deeply suspicious of what he saw as Le Corbusier's disciplinarian and elitist views, which defined human aspirations largely in terms of social order and material comfort.[14]

As Jorn was formulating his multifaceted critical theory of architecture, he would look back much more favorably on what he saw as the leading revolutionary artistic and political movement of those years: Surrealism. He argued that, having "liberated artistic creation from the cold, clammy, and deadening embrace of aestheticism," Surrealism had made it "possible to achieve truly vital and liberated art forms."[15] Jorn visited the vast International Exhibition of Surrealism held at the Beaux-Arts Gallery in Paris in 1938. The dimly lit, cavern-like scenography of the exhibition—mannequins and Parisian street signs were jumbled together with Surrealist objects, sculptures, paintings, and collages—allowed him to envision the possibility of a radically nonutilitarian architecture, one that prefigured a future society liberated from the bourgeois ethos championed by Le Corbusier and his supporters.[16] As he explained in "Face to Face":

> In the same period as Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, the Surrealists in Paris were creating interiors that offered a completely different perspective with regard to spatial development. Where architects were calling for light, they pronounced murk and gloom; where open space was proclaimed, they answered with labyrinths, impenetrability, hollows. Where planning was proposed, they answered with the hazardous. If utilization was praised, they defended the useless.[17]

During his first stay in Paris, Jorn had no doubt become familiar with Surrealist writings on architecture critical of modernist principles of proportion,

13. Asger Jorn, "Face to Face," in *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p. 75.

14. Even if his pavilion's murals echoed the leftist slogans of the Popular Front government, Le Corbusier was, in those days, collaborating with the editorial board of the magazines *Plans* and *Préludes*. These were authoritarian publications that championed some of the themes that were soon to become central to Pétain's Révolution Nationale, such as a synthesis between left and right, between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the formation of a modern-day Saint-Simonian technocracy led by engineers and polytechnicians. See Mary McLeod, "Urbanism and Utopia: Le Corbusier from Regional Syndicalism to Vichy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1985).

15. Jorn, "Face to Face," p. 71.

16. For an extensive discussion of this exhibition, see Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 20–103; and Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp. 23–64.

17. Jorn, "Face to Face," p. 77.

material sublimation, and machinist technical refinement (many of which were published in the review *Minotaure*). The Surrealists, in their appreciation of architecture, as of art in general, celebrated precisely what bourgeois modernity tried to repress as useless—the uncanny, the archaic, the outdated, the visionary. Breton famously praised the bodily and dreamlike qualities of the Facteur Cheval's Palais Idéal in Hauterives, which he visited on a pilgrimage with other Surrealists in 1931.[18] In a 1933 issue of *Minotaure*, Dalí tried to recover the legacies of Art Nouveau architecture, especially that of his Catalan countryman Antoni Gaudí, describing Gaudí's naturalistic ornamentation as "beautifully terrifying and edible," in the hallucinatory terms of his "paranoiac-critical method."[19] Similar ideas were espoused by Tristan Tzara in his essay "D'un certain automatisme du goût," which appeared in the same issue. Using Freudo-Marxian terminology, Tzara described the need to subvert bourgeois normalcy by a rediscovery of the elemental powers of nature and the regenerative force of "primitive" architecture, such as huts and igloos, with their "feminine bodily cavities."[20]

The most significant Surrealist influence on Jorn's thinking on architecture, however, was Roberto Matta. The two became lifelong friends in Paris, where the young Chilean artist was employed in Le Corbusier's studio and worked with Jorn on murals for the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux. Like Jorn, Matta soon felt estranged from Le Corbusier's views. In 1938, with the help of Georges Hugnet, he published the poetic essay "Mathématique sensible—architecture du temps" (Sensible mathemathics—architecture of time), in which he laid out, without ever naming him directly, his critique of Le Corbusier's fascination with the notion of harmony and his reliance on right-angle geometry to legitimize his architectural proposals.[21] Matta called for a new architecture that would stimulate man's sensory



Roberto Matta. Project for an apartment in "Mathématique sensible–architecture du temps." 1938.

18. André Breton, "Facteur Cheval," in *Le Revolver à Cheveux Blancs* (Paris: Les Cahiers Libres, 1932), n.p. Breton also refers to the Palais Idéal in his essay "Situation surréaliste de l'objet," found in *Position politique du surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1935). Photographs of the Palais Idéal are reproduced by Jorn in "Face to Face."

19. Salvador Dalí, "De la beauté terrifiante et comestible de l'architecture Modern style," *Minotaure* 3–4 (1933), pp. 69–76. Jorn would eventually include a photograph of the Casa Mila in his 1943 essay "On the Artistic Potential Inherent Within Architecture."

20. Tristan Tzara, "D'un certain automatisme du goût," *Minotaure* 3–4 (1933), p. 84.

21. Roberto Matta, "Mathématique sensible—architecture du temps," *Minotaure* 11 (1938), p. 43. The expression "sensible mathematics" was an appropriation of Le Corbusier's language in *Vers une architec-*

organs, and where interiors would become user-controlled, constantly shifting and atmospheric. Blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, between the body and its surrounding space, such living arrangements, Matta suggested, would free the human body from the stifling discipline imposed by work. To illustrate his ideas, the artist, trained as an architectural draftsman, included a small drawing-collage showing a vast, labyrinthine multistory apartment space filled with biomorphic, inflatable furniture.

Throughout the war years, during which he participated in the Danish resistance via the Helhesten group, Jorn seemed to have been optimistic that a vast, active, and democratic collaboration among everyday people, professional and amateur artists, and architects would occur during the coming reconstruction years. Paraphrasing one of Lautréamont's maxims popularized by the Surrealists, Jorn enthused that society would let "*'L'art doit être fait par tous'* become a reality! It is the only sound basis on which a truly democratic and creative artistic constituency can be founded."[22] In "Om Arkitekturens Kunstneriske Muligheder" (On the Artistic Potential Inherent Within Architecture), Jorn further explained that "a new and truly effective approach to practical and artistic problems affecting architecture will only be established on the basis of a different (collective) attitude to our surroundings, to our environment."[23] He published several more polemical essays (in journals such as *Dansk Kunsthaandvaerk, Arkitekten, Byggmästaren,* and *Forum*) in which he further refined his critique of Le Corbusier and showed his interest in the creation of "organic spaces" using natural forms in diverse media. Jorn was also immersed in a series of books by the Swedish historian of architecture Erik Lundberg published in the 1940s: *Arkitekturens Formspråk: studier över arkitekturens konstnärliga värden i deras historiska utveckling* (The Formal Language of Architecture: Studies on the Artistic Values of Architecture in their Historical Development).[24] The different volumes of *Arkitekturens Formspråk* were generously illustrated and contained extensive discussions of biological and decorative forms recurrent in architecture throughout different periods. It is largely through this series of books that Jorn, using a dichotomy he inherited from *The Birth of Tragedy,* framed his discussion of art and architectural history as a constant struggle between the people's desire to uphold an unruly, organic, collectivist Dionysian "attitude to life" and the orderly, repressive, geometrical, and individualist Apollonian ethos of the ruling classes. Jorn followed Lundberg's creative use of photography; in "Levend Ornament" (Living ornament), an essay that argued that natural dynamism is the very basis of architectural form, he juxtaposed plant

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ture (Paris: Éditions Crès/Collection de L'Esprit Nouveau, 1923) to describe his reliance on geometrical "tracés régulateurs," inspired by Heinrich Wölfflin in his study of Renaissance and Baroque paintings, to harmonize the façade of his modernist villas.

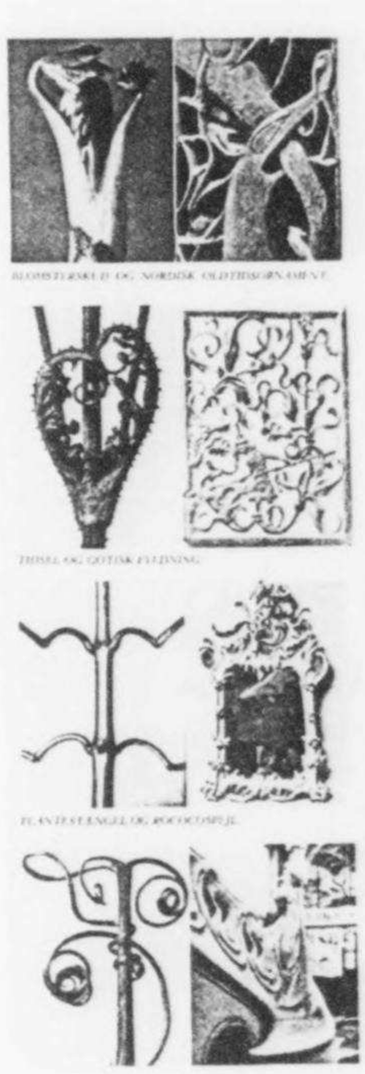
22. Jorn, "The Living Essence of the Language of Form," in *Fraternité Avant Tout,* p. 101.

23. Jorn, "On the Artistic Potential Inherent Within Architecture," in *Fraternité Avant Tout,* p. 46.

24. Erik Lundberg, *Arkitekturens Formspråk: Studier över arkitekturens konstnärliga värden i deras historiska utveckling* (ten volumes; Stockholm: Nordisk rotogravyr, 1945–1961).

images by the German photographer Karl Blossfeldt with Gothic, rococo, and *Jugendstil* architectural details, here echoing Walter Benjamin's insight that "Blossfeldt, with his astonishing plant photographs, reveals the forms of ancient columns in a horse willow, a bishop's crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle."[25]

Despite Jorn's enthusiasm for new collective forms of action and his frenzied publishing activities, postwar material and economic situations were dire, foreclosing the immediate possibility of launching an ambitious architectural project.[26] Hence architecture took a back seat to poetry and painting within the Cobra group.[27] Also, Jorn's hope that a "more complete kind of socialist democracy" would emerge in Europe was proving misbegotten, as the American occupation forces gradually instituted their vast plan for the capitalist reconstruction of Europe. Nevertheless, Jorn and his collaborators launched an artistic collaboration in 1949 in Bregnerød, a small town 30 kilometers north of Copenhagen. They were invited there by students to decorate a house owned by the architecture department of the University of Copenhagen. Jorn had undertaken a similar project during the war with members of Helhesten, decorating his child's kindergarten classroom using tempera paint, but his new experiment, in a spirit of total anti-specialization and deskilling, would be even bolder, as they decorated with vandalistic fervor almost every square inch of the inside of the simple brick-and-masonry home. Walls, ceilings, windows, doors, even everyday objects, were boldly covered with strange creatures, inscriptions, and poems. Jorn painted over one of the walls of the living room; over the adjacent hearth Stephen Gilbert

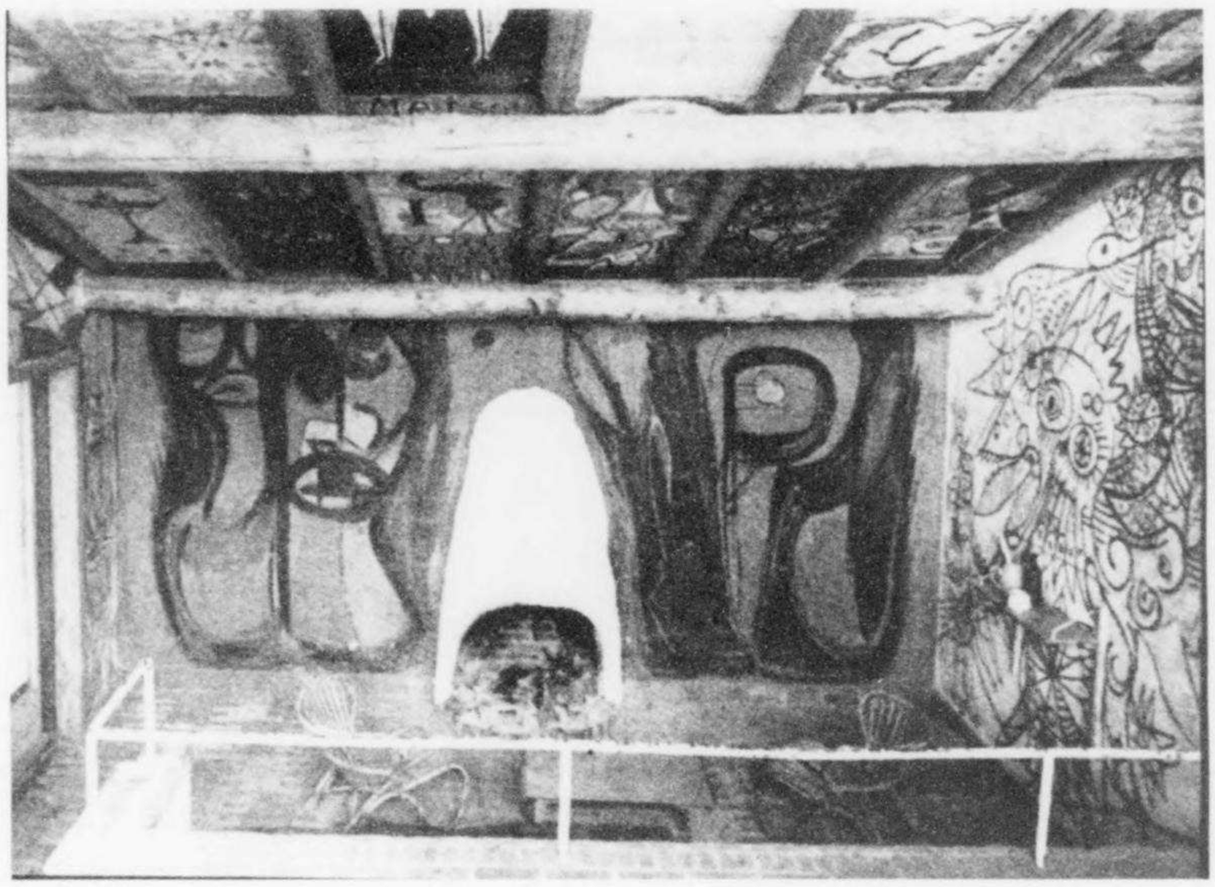


Detail from Jorn's "Levend Ornament," showing photographs by Karl Blossfeldt. 1949.

25. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 512. Original photographs in Blossfeldt, *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder* (Berlin: Wasmuth, 1928). Jorn may well have discovered these photographs, which were not very well known at the time, while in Paris through the journal *Documents*. See Georges Bataille, "Le Langage des Fleurs," *Documents* 3–4 (1929), pp. 160–68. Asger Jorn, "Levend ornament," *Forum. Maandblad voor architectuur en gebonden kunsten*, no. 4 (1949), pp. 137–47. Translated into Dutch by Constant based on earlier article.

26. Having returned to Paris, Jorn was indigent, surviving on food rations, as did many of the artist friends who joined him to found the Cobra group in 1948. The critic Michel Ragon describes in powerful terms the extreme conditions of many postwar artists living in Paris in *D'une berge à l'autre: Pour mémoire 1943–1953* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), pp. 164–66.

27. With the notable exceptions of an illustrated essay attacking modern architecture and city planning by Michel Colle, "Vers une architecture symbolique," *Cobra* 1 (December 1948), pp. 22–23.

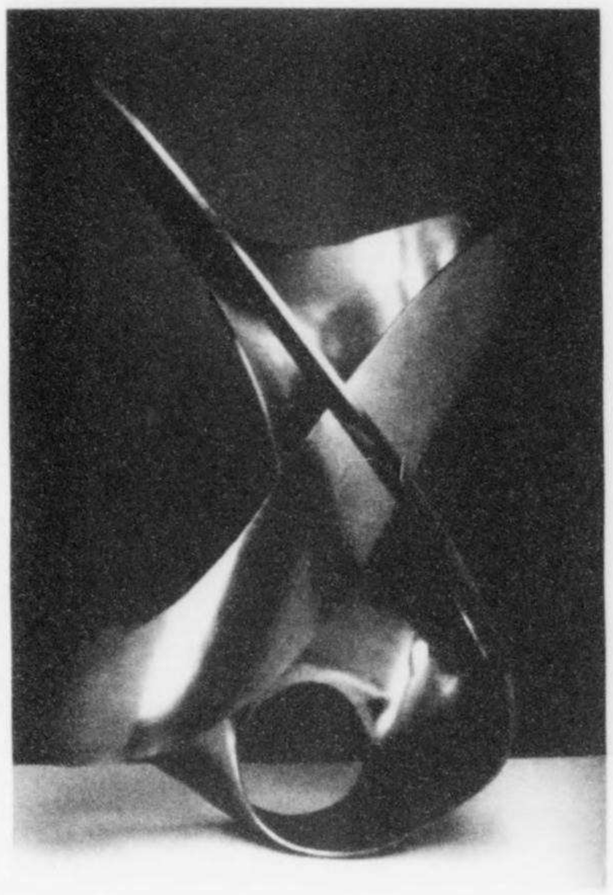


Living room of The Architects' House, Bregnerød, Denmark. 1949.

painted a mural that mimicked the flickering movement of the fire underneath.

In an essay of 1952, "Om Vämåleriets Möjligheter" (The inherent potential of mural painting), Jorn insisted that, unlike the work of commercial mural artists or that of his former mentor Léger (who was by then involved in the modernization of Catholic "sacred art" in France, along with Henri Matisse, Jean Lurçat, and Jean Bazaine), all of the decorative work conducted by the Cobra group was done in a spirit of total financial and ideological independence.[28] "We were able to paint exactly whatever we wanted, and in the way we wanted, without having to put up with the mind-numbing censorial policy that necessarily accompanies paid projects."[29] No less important, "the paintings were executed using the kind of inexpensive techniques which ensure that they will not remain in place for all eternity," thereby making a statement against the idea of monumentality.[30] In his earlier recollection of the event, the poet Christian Dotremont was in agreement with Jorn, celebrating the independence felt by the artists and describing their spontaneous process of appropriating the house in Bachelardian terms of *rêverie* and "material imagination." In addition to the actual decorating, the Cobra members shared communal experiences—wandering through the adjacent forests, cutting wood for the fireplace, cooking. This opened the doors to a new type of community, in which each individual contribution would be preserved while also being meaningfully connected to the whole, thereby allowing art to have a transformative role in everyday life.[31] Unlike Le Corbusier's notion of a "synthesis of the arts," in which artists are essentially employed to reproduce the master's plan, each Cobra artist's contribution was autonomous and distinct from the others. Jean-Luc Nancy's

28. See Marcel Billot, "Le Père Couturier et l'art sacré," in *Paris–Paris, 1937–1957* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981), pp. 196–205, and Françoise Caussé, *La Revue "L'Art Sacré": Le Débat en France sur l'art et la religion (1945–1954)* (Paris: Cerf, 2010).
29. Asger Jorn, "The Inherent Potential of Mural Painting," in *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p. 252.
30. Ibid.
31. Christian Dotremont, "Les grandes choses," *Le Petit Cobra* 2 (1949), p. 5.



Max Bill. Tripartite Unit. *1948–49. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ProLitteris, Zürich.*

concept of "being singular-plural" helps to make sense of this process, as it describes in cogent terms the mutual inseparability of subjective expression and collectivism.[32]

Jorn's hopes of doing more than decorating finished buildings via the creation of "organic" architecture, as well as his interest in the history of the Bauhaus, were briefly renewed by his encounter with Max Bill in the fall of 1953. Jorn, who suffered from severe pulmonary problems, had to stay at the Silkeborg sanatorium for several months, which contributed to the dissolution of the Cobra group in 1951. After his stay in Denmark, he and his family moved to another sanatorium in Switzerland. When Jorn arrived in Chésières, Bill, then age 45, was at the height of his critical and commercial success, not only as an artist but also as an industrial designer. At the Milan Triennial held in 1951, Bill was crowned with the Grand Prix for his design achievements after the war.[33] He had also received the first prize for sculpture at the São Paulo Biennial for his *Tripartite Unit* (1948–49): the stainless-steel sculpture showed the artist's strong interest in the sculptural properties of industrial materials, as well as in topology and the continuous surface of the Möbius strip.

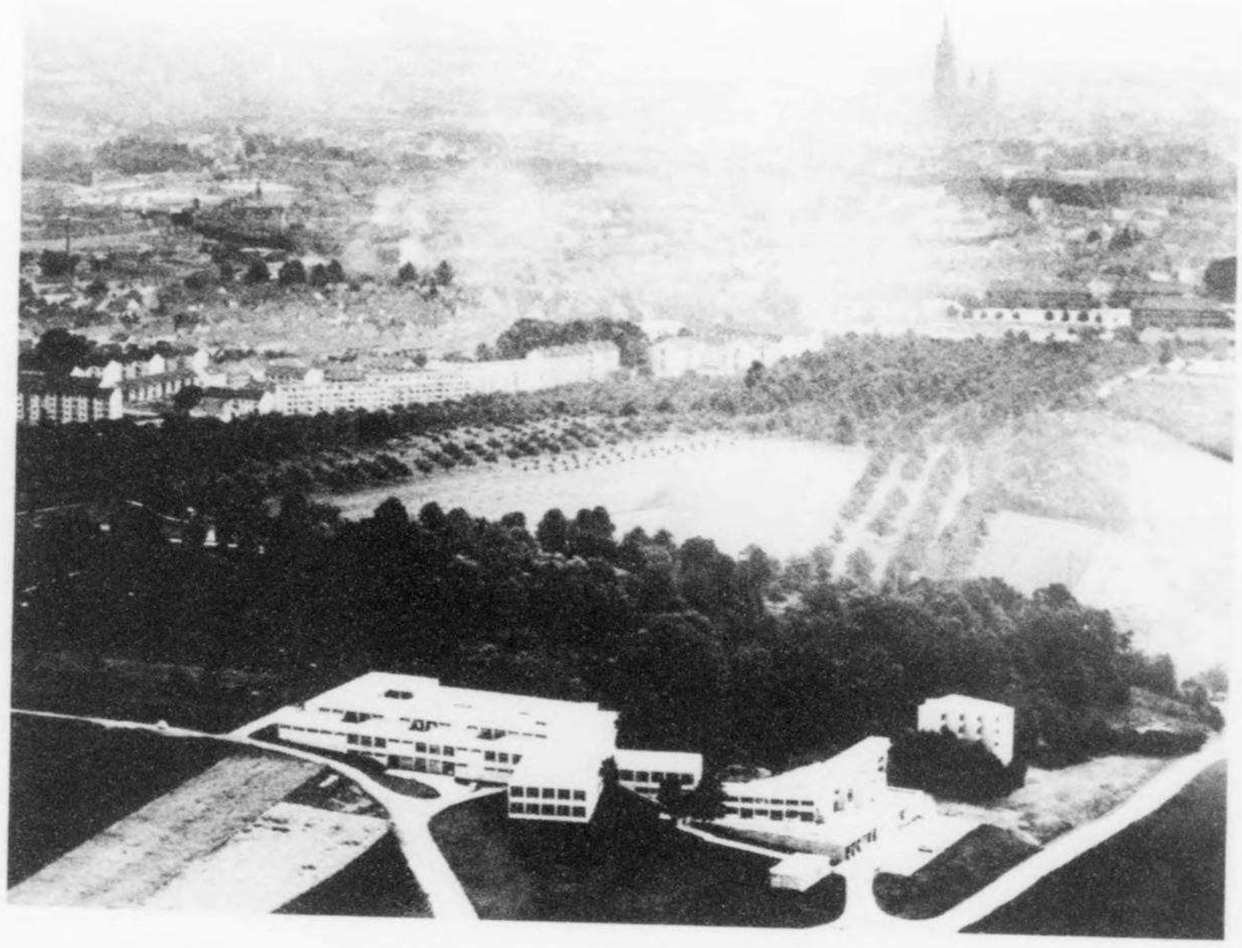
For the previous few years, Bill had been actively involved in the founding of a progressive school in West Germany. In 1946, the Geschwister Scholl Stiftung, an anti-Fascist foundation supported by the American authorities in West Germany, opened the Ulmer Volkshochschule. The school honored the memory of Hans and Sophie Scholl, two members of the Weisse Rose group who were executed in Munich in 1943 by the Nazis. Receiving financial and political support from John J. McCloy, the American ambassador in Berlin, the foundation was allowed to transform this small, regional public school into an international technical university. In 1950 Bill was singled out by the foundation as a prime candidate to supervise this ambitious, politically charged project.[34] Focused on his commercial design practice

32. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Gallilée, 1996). This book was brought to my attention by Karen Kurczynski, "Jorn's Aarhus Murals and the Question of Collective Expression," (unpublished conference paper, University of Alberta, 2009), p. 10.

33. Bill had been actively involved in the debates regarding the physical reconstruction of Europe. See his widely circulated textbook: Max Bill, *Wiederaufbau* (Zurich: Verlag für Architektur, 1945).

34. See René Spitz, *Hfg Ulm: The View Behind the Foreground: The Political History of the Ulm School of Design, 1953–1968* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 2002).

in neutral Switzerland during the war, Bill had kept his political slate clean of both Fascist and Communist affiliations—unlike a number of architects and designers trained at the Bauhaus who either went to work in the Soviet Union or had compromised with the German authorities during the 1930s and '40s. The foundation intended to nourish the blooming of a democratic, liberal spirit amidst the rubble



Aerial view of the Hochschule für Gestaltung campus, Ulm, 1955. Photograph by Otl Aicher. Courtesy of HfG Archive, Ulm.

of German militarism. Bill, who was to act as director, was commissioned to design the school's campus. He proposed the name Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG), salvaging the subtitle of Walter Gropius's Bauhaus in Dessau.[35]

The HfG campus in Ulm is the most significant realization of Bill's mid-century ideas about design and architecture. Although he originally wanted to work with glass and steel, as Mies did for the Illinois Institute of Technology campus in Chicago, these materials were hard to come by during the reconstruction. Bill instead chose reinforced concrete as the primary material, along with spruce wood for the windows and much of the furniture. He approached the plan for the HfG as he would have one of his Concretist paintings or sculptures, trying to find a logical and mathematical solution for it.[36] The aesthetic experience of art and architecture, according to Bill, was not only socially, culturally, and politically

35. In the 1950s, Bill was very involved in the popularization of the ideas of certain Bauhaus masters, via numerous publications and introductions to books such as: Vassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Bern: Benteli, 1953); Vassily Kandinsky, *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche: Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente* (Bern: Benteli, 1953); and Max Bill, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (Milan: Il Balcone, 1955).

36. My interpretation is indebted to that found in Hans Frei, *Max Bill: Konkrete Architektur? Über Max Bill als Architekt* (Berlin: Lars Müller Publishers, 1991). See also the richly illustrated issue of *2G* 29–30 (2004), ed. Karin Gimmi.

determined, and therefore purely contingent; it was also a mode of evaluating the world that is rational, therefore "universal." As Bill wrote in his essay "The Mathematical Approach in Contemporary Art" (1949):

> [Mathematical] measurements supply contemporary art with a new content; they are not formalism, for which they are often mistaken; they are not form signifying beauty, but thought, idea, cognition transmuted into form. Thus, they possess not merely a surface existence, but pertain to the fundamental idea of cosmic structure and are part of that overall picture of the world, which we are able to perceive from our present-day standpoint. This is not portrayal, however, but a new system, conveying elemental powers in a manner which renders them perceptible through the senses.[37]

In his manipulation and ordering of the HfG's space, Bill clearly demonstrated his aversion to monumentalism and axiality, which he associated, as did many postwar modernists, with Fascist or Nazi architecture. The plan was asymmetrical and, like Gropius's Bauhaus, partitioned according to its various social functions: work (the classrooms and workshops), recreation (the bar and cafeteria), circulation (the long corridor and staircases), and habitation (the student residences). A very long corridor, reminiscent of Hannes Meyer's Trade Union School in Bernau, unites these different sections and gives the building its overall coherence. In his selection and application of a consistent module based on the square shape, Bill renounced superfluous ornament and streamlining, preferring orthogonal lines instead (aside from the curvilinear bar in the cafeteria). Everything seemed to be kept to a minimum in order to impart a sense of clarity, thriftiness, and casual order to the premises. The *Ulmer Hocker* (Ulm stool), made of pine and beech, has become emblematic of the HfG: economical, light, and robust, it has panels that are simply welded together in a coherent formal solution. As a single piece, it can be a seat, an occasional table, a shelf, or a portable tray; grouped together, they can become bookshelves. The stool was meant to fit into any room at the HfG, and its orthogonal form echoes the square windows of the structural module. This straightforward and geometric approach was, at the time, a clear rejection of dominant trends in West German and American design, which leaned towards streamlining and biomorphism.

Prior to the official opening ceremony, Bill ran promotional articles in the architectural press featuring a sketch of the future campus to attract potential members, using the interwar Bauhaus as a symbol of postwar reconstruction. In the British *Architects' Year Book* he boldly proclaimed:

> Experienced artists and theoreticians, young men and women with bold, alert and eager minds, will be invited to Ulm: some to teach or to

37. Max Bill, "The Mathematical Approach in Contemporary Art," in *Max Bill*, ed. Tomás Maldonado (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nueva Visión, 1955), pp. 37–38.

pursue their experimental work, others to learn from these. But we are confident that all who come to us will be imbued with the same whole-hearted ambition of joining co-operatively in a great and disinterested endeavour. I hope we shall not disappoint the hopes that have been placed in us and be able to establish a new international home for the old Bauhaus ideals, where the youth of all nations can find a propitious environment for the free development of its creative faculties.[38]

Jorn reacted with great interest to Bill's enthusiastic call. Jorn understood that the opening of this new Bauhaus would be based directly on the model of the *Volkshochschule*. He held such alternative schools, which were dedicated to community education (and which were known in Denmark as *folkhøjskole*), in high esteem, unlike the *Kunstgewerbeschule*, or arts-and-crafts school, or the *technische Hochschule*, the professional technical school, which were both oriented towards preparing students for the market. Introduced in Scandinavia in the nineteenth century by Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, such schools typically offered free, short-term courses to working people in various creative fields, such as painting, handicrafts, and creative writing, as well as in philosophy and theology. Since they did not offer professional degrees and were run by volunteer community members, *Volkshochschulen* were typically open to experimental projects and teaching methods that promoted hands-on learning.[39] These were the perfect conditions, Jorn thought, for the development of a new school dedicated to the creation of democratic collaborations among artists, architects, and everyday people, which he had sought since leaving Léger's academy.

He wrote a letter to Bill inquiring about the project and the role of art at Ulm, hoping to secure a job as a teacher. Bill responded by sending him a promotional brochure but quickly added that the "arts are understood differently here than at the old Bauhaus."[40] In a second letter, to which he attached issues of the illustrated magazine *Cobra*, Jorn offered to develop a collaboration between the "free artists" and the new school in Ulm. He hoped to create a *Volkshochschule* type of community in honor of the one that emerged at the Bauhaus in Weimar when Walter Gropius invited the revolutionary Expressionist artists of the Novembergruppe and the Arbeitstrat für Kunst. Jorn also hoped that, with a stable base, he could develop cooperative projects like the one in Bregnerød—but over the course of several months instead of a few days. However, Jorn's second

38. Max Bill, "The Bauhaus Idea: From Weimar to Ulm," *Architects' Year Book* 5 (1953), p. 32.

39. See Asger Jorn, "Value and Economy: Critique of Political Economy and the Exploitation of the Unique," in *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, ed. Peter Shields (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 206. See also Jorn, *Pour la forme*, pp. 32–33.

40. Unpublished letter from Bill to Jorn (dated December 1, 1953), Jorn Museum archives, Silkeborg. All translations from the archives are mine.

proposal was met with patronizing comments regarding Cobra's lack of originality, and finally by a firm negative:

> In Ulm, we consider the arts as the foundation of all the things we make here. But by "art" we do not understand any kind of "self-expression," but rather objective (*wirklich*) art. We do not agree with most of what the Cobra group or similar groups do, because these experiments have, in our opinion, already been done and superseded a long time ago. In Ulm, we will deal with much more extreme, new, and generally more current questions of design (*Gestaltung*).[41]

In other words, the Ulm school had abandoned the model of the folk school and did not intend to preoccupy itself with painting and sculpture (even under their various abstract guises) in its curriculum. Instead, courses such as industrial design and architecture, which were introduced to the Bauhaus in Dessau, were to be offered, complemented by new courses on political science, sociology, mass- media communication, and eventually semiotics. Seeing that any debate about teaching art was moot, the decision having been made by the foundation, Bill wished to end the discussion with Jorn.[42] He then proposed to help Jorn find a job at an art academy in Germany (suggesting the Hochschule für bildende Kunste in Hamburg, where certain abstract painters, such as Willi Baumeister, had been employed as teachers). Because of his negative sentiments towards art academies, and since he was after more than a salaried position, Jorn immediately refused to accept Bill's help.

Wirklich Kunst, as mentioned in Bill's letter to Jorn, should be understood as *gute Form* or good design, a modernist concept Bill had been promoting since 1949 via public conferences and a travelling exhibition of the same name sponsored by the Swiss Werkbund. *Gute Form*, as described by Bill, was the search for a "valid gestalt" or "essential simplicity."[43] Within the reconstruction context, Bill declared that the goal of the artist-designer was to produce objects that were aesthetically harmonious, economical, and therefore socially more responsible. One of Bill's slogans was "good because at once beautiful and practical."[44] In his essay "Continuity and Change" Bill argued that approaching design in this way would mean that "consumer goods" would be elevated to the status of "cultural goods": "That is the route by which art can leave its ivory tower and return to life—no longer a substitute for life, but as an integral, supporting part of it."[45] As Paul

41. Unpublished letter from Bill to Jorn (January 14, 1954), Jorn Museum archives, Silkeborg.
42. Despite Jorn's characterization in *Pour la forme*, Bill may not have been altogether opposed to the idea of having visual artists in Ulm, since he drew artists' studios in his early sketches of the HfG campus. However, in one of his letters to Jorn, Bill argued, somewhat mysteriously, that painters at the Bauhaus were like "flies with the disease of painting" and that they were largely responsible for the school's demise. Unpublished letter from Bill to Jorn (May 9, 1955), Jorn Museum archives, Silkeborg.
43. Max Bill, "The Good Form," in *Form, Function, Beauty = Gestalt* (London: Architectural Association, 2010), p. 28–31.
44. Bill, "The Bauhaus Ideas from Weimar to Ulm," p. 29.
45. Max Bill, "Continuity and Change," in *Form, Function, Beauty = Gestalt*, p. 80.

Betts explains, what was at stake in Bill's program for the HfG was the reeducation of the German youth through "the rehabilitation of the damaged authority of science and rationality." Against the "corrosive effects of Nazi irrationalism" and rampant "American commercialism," "good design" was to bridge the perceived antagonism between "technical civilization" and "German *Kultur*."[46]

Underlying Bill's notion of *gute Form*, rooted in the moralizing rhetoric of the Werkbund, is the deterministic idea that rationally planned environments necessarily help create rational social behaviors.[47] In its reformist attempt to create a democratic and transparent public sphere, Bill's call for *gute Form* was received with enthusiasm by the new federal government and the pro-American authorities as a much-awaited antidote to the *Blut und Boden* ideology of the National Socialists. Bill and others at the HfG embraced the newly expanded consumer class as the agent and the destination of this "good design," which led them to focus first and foremost on the production of household items, and next on a variety of objects for everyday use in offices, industrial production, and scientific research laboratories.

Bill's emphasis on the moral dimension of the Bauhaus should not, however, be confused with Hannes Meyer's productivist call for a more egalitarian, socialist distribution of goods. Although he did study architecture under Meyer (as the similarity of the HfG to the ADGB Trade Union School attests), Bill never adopted the Swiss architect's Soviet-inflected ideas about cooperative work organization and scientific management.[48] On the contrary, much of Bill's design practice was based on abstract-geometrical mathematical reasoning and focused on the production of high-priced items for professionals and upper-middle-class clients. Although it sometimes bore formal similarities to Soviet precedents, Bill's sculptural work took classical forms; he used traditional, auratic, commercially viable materials like bronze and marble. *Form*, published in 1951, contains photographs illustrating a sound approach to formal design. Notably, Bill even juxtaposed a modernist abstract sculpture by artist Georges Vantongerloo with the Adler limousine designed by Gropius in 1921, thereby positioning Constructivist art in relation not to models of socialistic mass production but to status symbols of an emerging affluent class.[49]

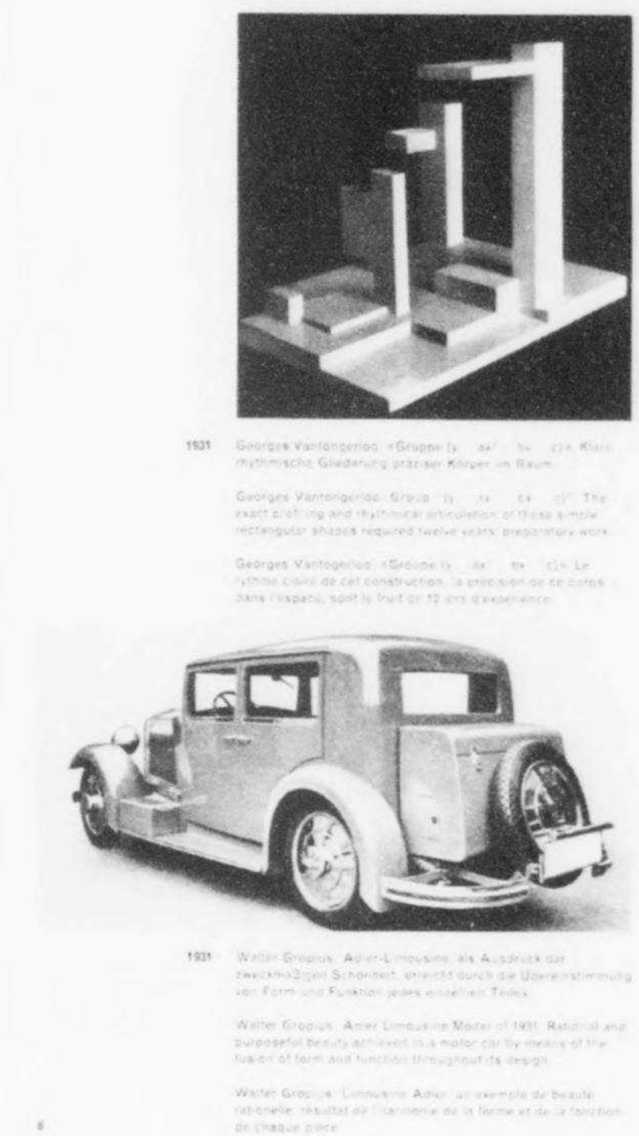
46. See Paul Betts, "Science, Semiotics and Society: The Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung in Retrospect," *Design Issues* 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 67–82.

47. See Mark Jarzombek, "The Discourses of a Bourgeois Utopia, 1904–1908, and the Founding of the Werkbund," in *Imagining Modern German Culture, 1889–1910*, ed. Françoise Forster-Hahn (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1996), pp. 137–145; and Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California, 2004).

48. On Meyer's version of functionalism, see K. Michael Hays, "Diagramming the New World, or Hannes Meyer's 'Scientization' of Architecture," in *The Architecture of Science*, ed. Peter Galison and Emily Thompson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 233–52.

49. Max Bill, *Form: A Balance Sheet of Mid-Twentieth-Century Trends in Design* (Basel: Verlag Karl Werner, 1952), p. 8. On Bill's artistic practice and his commercial success, see Philip Ursprung, "Continuity: Max Bill's Public Sculpture and the Representation of Money," in *Figuration/Abstraction: Strategies for Public Sculpture in Europe, 1945–1968*, ed. Charlotte Benton (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 231–49. On the (de)politicization of Constructivist art at mid-century, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 85–110.

Frustrated by what he saw as exclusionary and doctrinaire views, Jorn declared in another letter to Bill that if the HfG did not wish to cooperate with the "free artists," he and his allies would set up an "Imaginary Bauhaus" to fight the school's usurpation of the Bauhaus "idea." Jorn soon received legal threats from Bill about abusing a copyrighted name. The "Imaginary Bauhaus," which seemed at first to have been only one of Jorn's many plays on words, then became the reason for him to contact old friends and potential allies. As he circulated a proposal to flood the HfG's mailboxes with letters proclaiming the birth of a new "Imaginary Bauhaus," he realized it would be more interesting to set up an actual encounter between several of the "free artists."[50] In the spring of 1954, he accepted Enrico Baj's proposal to move from Switzerland to an Italian village where such encounters could take place: Albisola. Jorn moved into a house on Via Isola, which he immediately started to decorate, à la Schwitters's Merzbau, with sculptures, broken tiles, and found objects.[51] Albisola was ideally located both geographically and culturally: the warm weather relieved his health problems, and the town was an internationally recognized center for ceramics production as factory headquarters of the Futurist Tullio Mazzotti. (The factory was designed by the Bauhaus alumnus Nikolay Diulgheroff.) Through Mazzotti, Jorn met Lucio Fontana and discovered the colorful and stylized ceramics of Futurists like



1931 Georges Vantongerloo, «Groupe (y ax² + bx + c)» = Klare rhythmische Gliederung präziser Körper im Raum.

Georges Vantongerloo: Group (y = ax² + bx + c) = The exact profiling and rhythmical articulation of these simple rectangular shapes required twelve years' preparatory work.

Georges Vantongerloo: «Groupe (y = ax² + bx + c)» = Le rythme clairvoyant de cet agencement, la précision de ces corps dans l'espace, sont le fruit de 12 ans d'expérience.

1931 Walter Gropius, Adler-Limousine, als Ausdruck der zweckmäßigen Schönheit, erreicht durch die Übereinstimmung von Form und Funktion jedes einzelnen Teiles.

Walter Gropius, Adler Limousine Model of 1931. Rational and purposeful beauty achieved in a motor car by means of the fusion of form and function throughout its design.

Walter Gropius, Limousine Adler, un exemple de beauté rationelle, résultat de l'harmonie de la forme et de la fonction de chaque pièce.

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Page from Max Bill's Form: A Balance-Sheet of Mid-Twentieth Century Trends in Design. *1952.*

50. The people he first reached out to were from the art world: aside from his former Cobra collaborators Pierre Alechinsky and Karel Appel, he contacted Édouard Jaguer and the members of his group Phases; art critics René Renne and Claude Serbanne, associated with the review *Cahiers du Sud*; two people associated with the Imaginisterna group of Malmö, Karl Otto Götz and Anders Österlin; the painter Pierre Wemaëre; and two of Jorn's Surrealist friends from Latin America, Roberto Matta and Wifredo Lam. Another new ally was the Italian painter Enrico Baj, who had founded the Arte Nucleare (Nuclear Art) movement a few years before as an attack on formalist abstract art. It is at Baj's house in the fall of 1954 that Jorn discovered a leaflet written in French on a typewriter, *Potlatch*, the theoretical organ of the Internationale Lettriste (Lettrist International, LI). Through André-Frank Conord, who had recently been excluded from the LI, Jorn came in contact with a person who would become his close friend for the rest of his life, Guy Debord.

51. In 1957, he bought a plot of land, which he set out to convert into a labyrinthine garden—what Debord would refer to as *architecture sauvage* (wild architecture). See Asger Jorn, *Le jardin d'Albisola* (Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974).

Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero. Taking part in what is often called "second Futurism," these artists, and others such as Vittorio Osvaldo Tommasini (a.k.a Farfa), with whom Jorn also became friends, began to create several small institutional structures (*case d'arte*, or houses of the arts) that sought to disseminate the Futurist aesthetic to the daily life of the masses through fashion and design.[52]

The first "Imaginist" encounter took place in Albisola from July to August 1954. It was at this "Incontro Internazionale della Ceramica" (International ceramics encounter) that a tentative platform was laid down in which the group recognized itself as an "Imaginist" Bauhaus. Jorn created and distributed stationery to the group's members (several addresses around the world were included in the hope of extending the network of "free artists") with the heading *Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste Contre un Bauhaus Imaginaire* (or IMIB).[53] They insisted that the Ulm school was "imaginary," for it had barred experimental artists from its walls. At the encounter, thanks to Mazzotti's offer of his industrial kilns, artists, locals, and children produced dozens of richly decorated ceramics and clay sculptures, which were subsequently exhibited outdoors in Albisola.[54]

Even if the very first experience of the IMIB managed to gather internationally famous artists and poets in Albisola, Jorn was not satisfied with its mostly regional success. He suggested presenting the group's collective efforts at the tenth Milan Triennial. It was primarily a strategic move. With the help of Mazzotti, he was able to associate the new group with a widely attended event, which afforded him the chance both to position the group within the field of architecture and industrial design and, perhaps more important, to publicly confront Max Bill, who was scheduled to give the keynote address. The topic of the day was the social relevance of industrial design amidst the reconstruction efforts in Western European nation-states via the Marshall Plan.[55] Bill delivered

52. The critical reevaluation of the role of crafts and small-scale production, especially ceramics and tapestry, greatly inspired Jorn's thinking at the time. He became so fascinated by the Futurists' production of folk-inspired ephemera in their attempt to constantly renovate culture that he organized, in September 1956, as part of the ongoing Congress of Free Artists, an international exhibition called "Mostra Ceramiche Futuriste" (Exhibition of Futurist Ceramics) in Alba. For a fuller discussion of Jorn's interest in second Futurism, see Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence: Cobra and Post-Cobra," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (Spring/Autumn 2011), pp. 294–98.

53. The word *imaginiste*, which Jorn discussed with Pierre Alechinsky and Édouard Jaguer, could be both a reference to the name of the Swedish Expressionist group Imaginisterna (which briefly collaborated with the Cobra group) and a neologism created by Jorn to designate what he conceived as the group's exploration of "material imagination" (the expression is Gaston Bachelard's), of artistic and architectural images capable of provoking the imagination. See Asger Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky, *Lettres à plus jeune* (Paris: L'Échoppe, 1998), pp. 42–43; and Édouard Jaguer, *Cobra au coeur du XXème siècle* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 67–68.

54. See Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Jorn in Italien: Werke in Keramik, Bronze und Marmor, 1954–1972* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 2007), pp. 42–44.

55. Bill and Jorn's speeches were given at the First International Congress of Industrial Design, a series of conferences organized by Ernesto Nathan Rogers held at the Teatro Dell'Arte al Parco as part

a high-minded speech, titled "Industrial Design in Society," in which he repeated his plea for the mass production of simple, harmoniously designed, and functionally integrated everyday objects. Following his correspondence, Jorn could finally respond to Bill publicly by reading his vitriolic pamphlet "Contre le fonctionnalisme."



Asger Jorn, Roberto Matta, and Pippo Pescio, working in Tullio Mazzotti's ceramic factory, Albisola, 1954.

Again adopting the point of view of the "free artist," Jorn attacked Bill's conception of "good design" as aesthetically stifling and conservative, based as it was "on classical philosophy and logic." Against Bill's compensatory classicism and "academic" view of abstract art, it was time, Jorn argued, to reimagine the Bauhaus with new, relativistic, and dynamic conceptions of form. Such was the goal of the recently founded Imaginist Bauhaus, whose ceramic production was shown within the exhibition space of the Triennial. What, then, did Jorn mean by the title "Contre le

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of the ongoing Triennial. For a comprehensive discussion of the event, see *La memoria et il future: I Congresso Internazionale dell'Industrial Design, Triennale di Milano, 1954* (Milan: Skira, 2001). On Bill and the Italian design world, see Roberto Fabbri, *Max Bill in Italia. Lo spazio logico dell'architettura* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2011).

fonctionnalisme"? As his previous architectural essays attest, he did not think of it as a simple rejection of functionalism. In an article published in June 1950, "Tidehvervet i stilforskningen" (Change of epoch in stylistic research), Jorn made his first explicit reference to the interpretative model Erik Lundberg used to analyze the evolution of the Gothic style (from "Gothic" to "Counter-Gothic") as a way to understand what he foresaw as the "revolutionizing" of functionalism initiated by Surrealism in the 1930s.[56] Jorn often insisted that Lundberg's books were of great interest to him because he felt the author's understanding of stylistic evolution was based on "dialectics." Although in the essay he did not define what he meant by "dialectics," we can recognize Jorn's lifelong but unorthodox interest in Marxist historiography as a tool by which to understand history's teleological unfolding in materialist terms. The functionalists' attack on ornament and reliance on geometrical proportions, which Jorn described as anti-stylistic, would be superseded by the Imaginists' "counter-functionalism." As he explained it, "counter-functionalism" was to be a more advanced stage of functionalism, a synthesis that would offer a richer understanding of nature and account for the psychological and ludic decorative impulses repressed by modernist architects, at least since Adolf Loos's famous polemics (republished approvingly by Le Corbusier in *L'Esprit Nouveau*).[57] In a letter to his IMIB colleague Pierre Alechinsky, Jorn explained more clearly what he meant by "counter-functionalism":

> It is connected to the question of *style*. This question was brilliantly clear to me in 1937, as I was working for Le Corbusier at the exposition for the *Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux*. He was wrong about that particular point and it is now our current task's essential point. This is why my theoretical attacks have ever since been directed at architects. It is the question of style that is the key [*la klee*] to our work. . . . It is a revolution of style that we are busy provoking.[58]

Writing "*la klee*" instead of "*la clé*" in the original French version, Jorn clearly refers to Paul Klee, another of Jorn's "keys" to understanding the Bauhaus's role in the coming "stylistic" revolution. When Jorn refers to "style" in art and architecture, he means not only an object's distinctive qualities but more specifically its ability to shock and to stir a strong experience in the viewer. "Style" is not merely formal; it is what creates an aesthetic response that is subjective but also socially effective. Therefore "style" is intimately connected to the concept of empathy. As Graham Birtwistle points out, Jorn's theory of art borrows extensively from the concept of *Einfühlung*, which derives from Wilhelm Worringer's popularization of Theodor

56. See the chapters "*Höggotiken i Frankrike*" and "*Gotik och Kontragotik i England*" in volume four of Lundberg's *Arkitekturens Formspråk* series.

57. Adolphe [Adolf] Loos, "Ornement et Crime," *L'Esprit Nouveau* 2 (1921), pp. 159–68. Original Viennese publication 1908.

58. Asger Jorn, "Lettre à Pierre Alechinsky," in *Discours aux pingouins et autres écrits* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, 2001), p. 161. My translation.

Lipps's aesthetics.[59] Jorn also argued, against Bill's sloganeering about the rational beauty of well-designed commodities, that ugliness must be acknowledged as integral to art and to any empathic relationship to the world. Paraphrasing Baudelaire's 1855 Salon essays, Jorn claimed in *Pour la forme* that "shock is always one of the great pleasures of art" and "beauty is always bizarre."[60] From this premise he concludes: "an era without ugliness would be an era without progress."

With his notion of counter-functionalism, Jorn tried to work through what he considered to be salvageable in the earlier notion of functionalism, a design philosophy he wanted to root in an expanded concept of organicism understood as exuberance and expenditure. In the coming stylistic revolution, artists would work directly with architects on the design of new spaces, elaborating on autonomous forms that would later be materialized. In a text in the Lettrist bulletin *Potlatch*, Jorn clarified these points:

> We must preserve what to us seems workable within the heritage of functionalism. As soon as the latter set itself against the old classicism, it proclaimed that "the house is a machine for living in," "the kitchen is a machine for feeding," etc. These arguments triumphed by virtue of their indubitable truth. . . . But if we are agreed on this point, why then do we claim to be dissatisfied with functionalism? It is because of its *aesthetic*, which never sought to regard the aesthetic aspect as an autonomous function of human activity.[61]

Even if these remarks are essentially about formal questions, they are also political, Jorn argued, because social and artistic developments are dynamically connected. Rejecting the vulgar Marxist idea that art merely reflects economic realities, Jorn postulates that "shifts in social paradigms are also catalysts for change and innovation in all other areas of human interaction."[62] Originally, Jorn argues, Le Corbusier's "machines to live in" were revolutionary and aesthetically shocking, but in time, as modernist architecture was codified, popularized, copied, and instrumentalized by institutional authorities, the movement's revolutionary character was emptied out. The original concept of functionalism, which was a liberation from previous notions of domesticity and comfort, became, in the hands of Bill, predictable and fixed, presuming there should be a symmetrical relationship between form and function. Fascinated by ideas of nature's vital dynamism and of physical relativity, Jorn developed his concept of counter-functionalism as one of unpredictability and transience, of dissymmetry between form

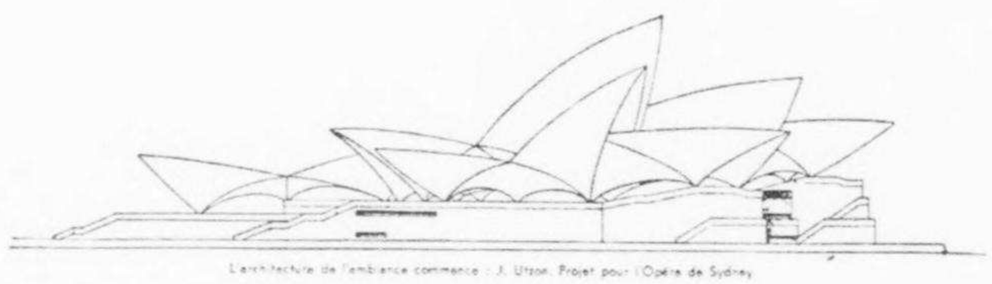
59. Graham Birtwistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art Between Helhesten and Cobra (1946–1949)* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986), p. 182. See also Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (Bern: R. Piper and Co., 1911).

60. Jorn, *Pour la forme*, p. 72.

61. Asger Jorn, "On the Current Value of the Functionalist Idea," in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 1996).

62. Asger Jorn, "Homes for the People or Concrete Castles in the Air?," in *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p. 137.

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Page from Jorn's Pour la Forme *showing an elevation of Jørn Utzon's Sydney Opera House, 1958.*

and function. Jorn would make these ideas the paradigmatic site for reflection upon the nature of artistic evolution. Through his unconventional understanding of physics, more specifically of Niels Bohr's theories, Jorn suggested that dissymmetry and relativity were to become the fundamentals of a new artistic research program. If self-contained mathematical forms like those used by Bill, for instance with his *Tripartite Unit*, were based on the principles of order and preservation, then dissymmetry would become a powerful movement, a force that would animate reality and therefore facilitate social transformation. One architect who was leading the way towards counter-functionalist architecture, Jorn argued, was his compatriot Jørn Utzon. On one of the last pages of *Pour la forme*, Jorn shows an elevation of the Sydney Opera House (then still under construction), its roof evocative of the form of seashells, writing optimistically, "The architecture of ambiance begins."[63]

63. Jorn, *Pour la forme*, p. 71.

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Jorn's attack on Bill proved to be just the beginning of a series of assaults; for example, Lygia Clark's "Neo-Concretist Manifesto" of 1959 also attacked Bill's notion of "concrete art" as having succumbed to "a dangerous hypertrophy of rationalism."[64] Even within Bill's inner circle of followers, "good design" was soon criticized for becoming a kind of orthodoxy. For instance, the Argentinean artist Tomás Maldonado, who left the neo-Constructivist circles in Buenos Aires to follow Bill in Ulm, became critical of his mentor, eventually replacing him as the director of the HfG. Already in the second issue of the school's journal, *Ulm*, Maldonado suggested that Bill's scorn for biomorphism and "self-expression" and his imposition of so-called "formal purity, expressed above all by the use of simple geometrical shapes and the truth of materials," were merely "the substitution of one artistic repertoire by another, equally artistic."[65] Maldonado further argued that, amidst the present conditions, formal considerations, or the upholding of one style over another, had ceased to be a solid basis for a socially engaged design practice.

The Imaginist Bauhaus never managed to produce the kind of counter-functionalist architecture Jorn was hoping for, nor did his plan for a vast collaboration between "free artists" and architects ever materialize. This situation partly explains his gradual move away from architectural debates[66]—*Pour la forme* marked his last publication on the matter. Indeed, despite Jorn's plea to conduct autonomous formal research and make an emancipatory use of technology and design, much of the group's activities remained marginal and confined to the world of handicraft production, even when they claimed to produce "industrial paintings" in Pinot Gallizio's experimental Imaginist laboratory.[67] Jorn's call for an architecture in which structure, surface, and sign take on expressive and organic character, as in Utzon's Opera House, would also prove to be particularly compatible with the demands of spectacular capitalism. Indeed, even if Jorn thought of this expressive biomorphic architecture as a kind of critique of bourgeois rationalism and a prefiguration of a liberated

64. See Lygia Clark, "Nostalgia of the Body," *October* 69 (Summer 1994), pp. 85–109. On Bill's reception in Latin America, see Monica Amor, "Theories of the Non-Object: The Postwar Crisis of Geometric Abstraction" (unpublished manuscipt).

65. Tomás Maldonado, "New Developments in Industry and the Training of the Designer," *Ulm: Quarterly Bulletin of the Hochschule für Gestaltung* 2 (October 1958), p. 29.

66. Although he remained concerned with architecture, Jorn's interest took a much more personal turn, as he focused on the decoration of his house in Albisola. He also briefly collaborated with Utzon in the 1960s for the new design of the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum (which was to show Jorn's personal art collection), but the project remained at the preliminary stage.

67. For a fuller discussion of Gallizio's encounter with Jorn and his contributions to the IMIB and the SI, see my "The Cavern of Antimatter: Giuseppe 'Pinot' Gallizio and the Technological Imaginary of the Early Situationist International," *Grey Room* 38 (Winter 2010), pp. 62–89.

socialist society more in tune with nature, it ended up being a commercially viable aesthetic for many architects of the 1960s onwards. These contradictions concerning architecture's critical role under present conditions led to increasing dissension as the IMIB transitioned into the Situationist group, leading to several exclusions and, as in Jorn's case, willful departures. But it would be too reductive to dismiss Jorn's Imaginist project as a simple failure. Indeed, the stakes in Jorn's debate with Bill were not, as Maldonado would put it, merely matters of taste for one aesthetic over another—a modernist chapel war between proponents of the geometrical versus the gestural. Rather, the debate was political. Jorn tried to frame the issue not simply in formal terms but also in terms of the roles that artists and the postwar public ought to play in democratic education and in the reconstruction of society.

How Language Looks: On Asger Jorn and Noël Arnaud's *La Langue verte**

STEVEN HARRIS

In November 1968, the Paris publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert brought out Asger Jorn and Noël Arnaud's *La Langue verte et la cuite*, an event accompanied by a banquet for 2,000 at a Danish restaurant in Paris, and a considerable response from the press, though the book has largely dropped from view since.[1] Initially titled *La Langue crue et la cuite*, the book was written in French by artist Asger Jorn, founding member of Cobra and of the Situationist International, and revised by Arnaud, member of the Surrealist "Main à plume" group in occupied Paris, founding member of the Revolutionary Surrealist group in postwar Paris (with which Jorn was also involved), and later regent in the Collège de 'Pataphysique.[2] Jorn, in addition to writing the text, also chose the illustrations, while Arnaud added sections of his own and reordered the material in collaboration with Jorn. It is thus the collective labor of two individuals who had first met in Paris in 1946, and who were both involved in the Revolutionary Surrealist group, a splinter group of Communist persuasion that had seceded from the main body of the Surrealist group shortly before the opening of its exhibition *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, at the Galerie Maeght. If Cobra was very much oriented against Arnaud when it was first formed in 1948, the paths of the two men crossed numerous times in subsequent years. Jorn turned to Arnaud as a trusted friend who was in in sympathy with his aims, who corrected Jorn's rather casual French, and who in general was willing to lend a hand to the enterprise.[3]

* Support from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and from the University of Alberta enabled the primary research for this essay to be undertaken. Mme. Danielle Muzerelle of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris granted me access to the fonds Arnaud before the holdings were catalogued, and Troels Andersen and especially Dorte Kirkeby Andersen of the Museum Jorn (formerly the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum) were remarkably generous during my various stays at the museum. Gavin Parkinson prompted an earlier version of this essay by inviting me to a conference on Surrealism and theory at the Courtauld in November 2009. I thank my sister and fellow collaborators on this issue, especially Karen Kurczynski.

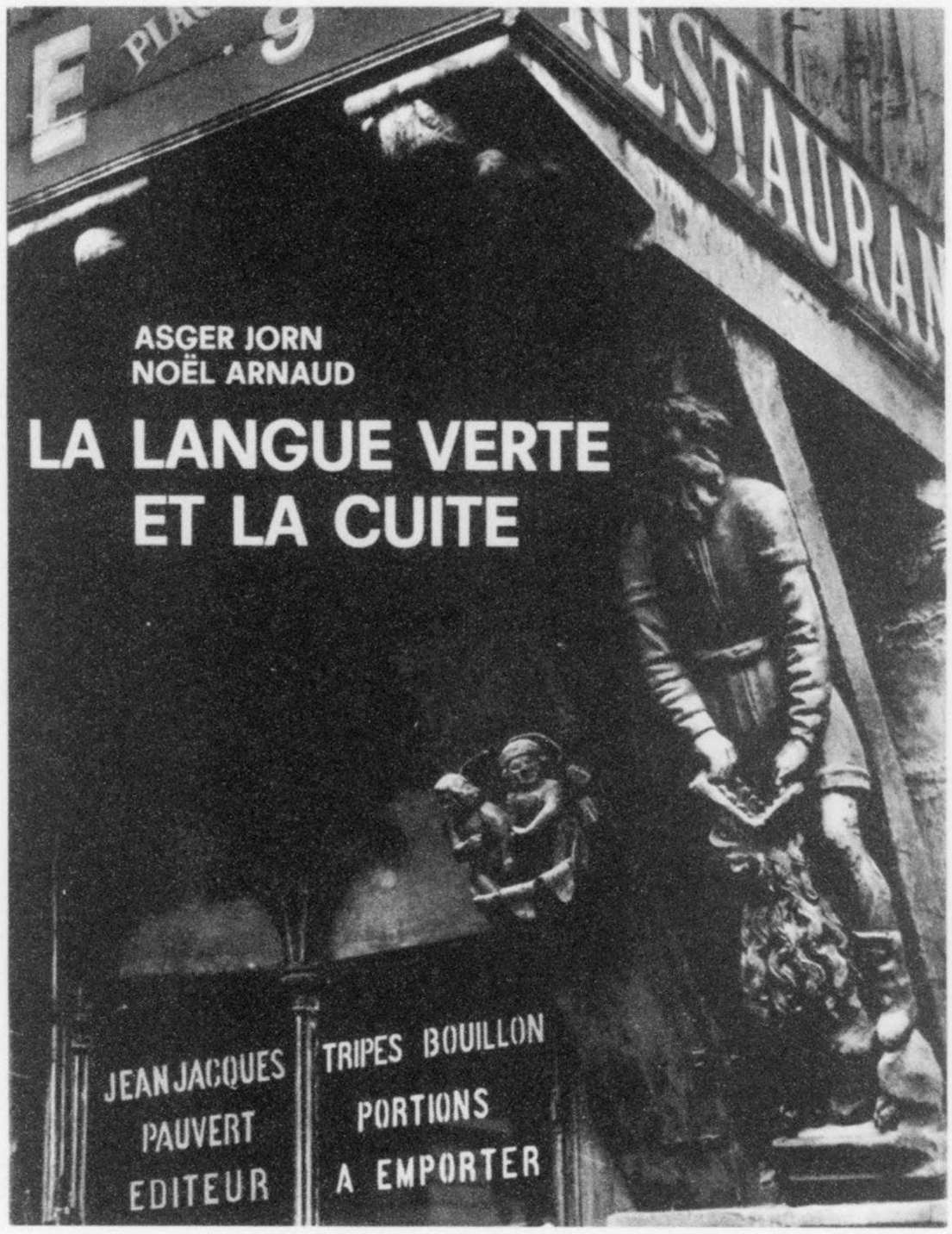
1. Noël Arnaud claims that the book was widely reviewed by the press at the time of its publication in *C'est tout ce que j'ai à dire pour l'instant: Entretiens avec Anne Clancier* (Saint-André-de-Najac: Patrick Fréchet, 2004), p. 140.

2. The various drafts and the visual materials used for the book are in the *fonds Arnaud* in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris.

3. Cobra was founded in November 1948 by six individuals who had walked out of the Conférence du Centre international de documentation sur l'art d'avant-garde organized by Arnaud,

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As the original title *La Langue crue et la cuite* indicates, the book was a response to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Le Cru et le cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*), which was published in 1964, as well as to structuralist theory more generally. I want to focus here on the nature of this response, as well as on the respective interests that Jorn and Arnaud brought to their project. For *La Langue verte et la cuite* is a book that includes a tremendous amount of visual imagery as well as written text, and its proportion of imagery to text (there are roughly 67 pages of text distributed across the 327 pages of the book, and 315 images) is one of the most significant features of Jorn's response. Jorn and Arnaud's dissatisfaction with structuralist theory is articulated by means of a parody that nevertheless depends on the notion of difference for the effectiveness of its critique, as well as on a series of permutations of images of tongues which constitute the iconography of the book.



Cover of Asger Jorn and Noël Arnaud's La Langue verte et la cuite, *1968.*

Le Cru et le cuit is, of course, Lévi-Strauss's examination of the extrapolation of myths based on a common myth about the origin of cooking, which exemplifies in his view the transition from nature to culture. Jorn's first title, *La Langue crue et la cuite*, makes explicit the role of the tongue in both eating and speaking, and refers implicitly to the Saussurean linguistic theory underpinning structuralism, which, in distinguishing between *la langue* (language) and *la*

Édouard Jaguer, and René Passeron, all former members of the Revolutionary Surrealist group in Paris, which had been dissolved in April of that year.

parole (speech), strips the word *langue* of any association with the body, despite the fact that *langue* denotes both "language" and "tongue." The title can be translated as *The Raw Tongue and the Cooked One*, with the added implication that *la cuite* is also an idiom that signifies being drunk. It is Arnaud who introduced the word *verte* into the title. *La Langue verte et la cuite* does not literally mean *The Green Tongue and the Cooked One*, since *la langue verte* is an idiom for slang or popular language, but rather "Slang and Drunkenness," two kinds of improper behavior involving the tongue. A *Dictionnaire de la langue verte* was compiled by the French journalist Alfred Delvau in the 1860s, and the term was used by later lexicographers of popular language in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *La Langue verte* is also the title of a book of poetry published in 1954 by the Belgian writer Géo Norge and reviewed two years later by Arnaud in Georges Bataille's review *Critique*; an epigraph by Norge is used to preface one of the sections of *La Langue verte et la cuite*.[4] Thus, if the relation of *langue* to language is maintained in Arnaud's revision of the title, it is to a language that is spoken on the street.

Arnaud had understood popular language to be a source for poetry and for the renewal of language since his days as a Surrealist in the 1940s. In an essay from 1945 with the significant title "Il faut que l'homme mange ses mots," Arnaud proposed the renaissance of a popular poetry through "*a delirious utilization of the normal forms of popular expression*," as in such phrases easily translatable into English as "to lose face," "to learn by heart," "to have on the tip of one's tongue," "to put one's finger on something"—phrases that are both figurative and concrete.[5] For Arnaud, popular language is already poetic in this sense, and it and Surrealist poetry can mutually inform and enrich one another. This aspiration was conditioned by Arnaud's Communist politics at the time, but also by the need to develop an alternative to the return to traditional poetic forms then being championed by the Communist poet and former Surrealist Louis Aragon.

Jorn's views were similarly oriented to a popular art and were based on his understanding of folk culture, such as had existed before art had become the specialized activity of professional artists. Jorn's account of early egalitarian societies, which largely depended on Friedrich Engels's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), held that agrarian societies had developed cults related to fertility and the seasons, which were only later elaborated into myths and then eventually into religions; religions were a consequence of the stratification of society, which also gave rise to forms of knowledge produced by individuals who were

4. Noël Arnaud, "Norge ou l'éloge de la langue vivante," *Critique* 107 (April 1956), pp. 319–31. A short poetic text by Norge incorporating references to poetry, music, and eating, taken from his own *La Langue verte*, prefaces the sixth section of the "Premier Service" of *La Langue verte et la cuite*, which is entitled "Fugue aux figues à la gomme chromosommaire" (p. 79).

5. Noël Arnaud, "Il faut que l'homme mange ses mots," in *La Terre n'est pas une vallée de larmes*, ed. Marcel Mariën (Brussels: Éditions "La Boétie," 1945), p. 49 (emphasis in the original). The list of phrases Arnaud highlights includes: "Peigner la girafe, avoir la tête farcie, parler à bâtons rompus, mâcher la besogne, faire tapisserie, branler dans la manche," etc., in addition to those more easily translated into English.

freed from the need to labor because others labored for them.[6] Structuralism was for Jorn a contemporary example of the disembodied, idealist forms of knowledge that stratified societies produced.

Art, on the other hand, was for Jorn a subjective reworking of matter that transformed its materials, rather than a representation of nature, and thus was not superstructural in the Marxist sense but rather part of the base, a material practice that transformed nature. Art, which was mimetic in hunting-and-gathering societies, became nonmimetic or symbolic in agrarian ones.[7] This is one of his major points of disagreement with Lévi-Strauss, for whom the primary function of art was mimetic.[8]

Jorn saw both folk culture and contemporary experimental art as active reworkings of matter. Upon resigning from the Situationist International in 1961, he conceived the multivolume series *10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art*, and founded the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism with a few friends to oversee this project; he is named as director of this institute on the title page of *La Langue verte*. Each volume was to be dedicated to a particular aspect or region of Scandinavian folk culture, with a written section contributed by a scholar and a larger section of photographs to follow. Jorn was struck by the possibilities of André Malraux's various series of books on art, published from 1947 on, and even hired Gérard Franceschi, the chief photographer at the Louvre—whose photographs Malraux frequently relied on—to take the majority of the photographs for his own, even larger series. Significantly, Jorn insisted on the separation of text

6. There is an eight-page manuscript in French entitled "Sience [*sic*] et Matherialisme [*sic*]" in the Jorn archives at the Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, which is dated by the museum ca. 1948–49, and which discusses what Jorn views as the inseparable relation between cults and agricultural labor in early agrarian societies. He writes: "*The materialist cults are cults of utility inseparable from work. The cult of the moon and the stars, the cult of the boat, of fish, of the lion, etc.* are tied to *Navigation, fishing and hunting*, which—especially the latter two—are work of the *night* and the *winter*. The cult of the sun, of the rain, of watering, the cult of the Bull, of [illegible], of bread, of milk, of trees etc. are tied to agriculture, the work of the *day* and the *summer*, and there is nothing 'supernatural' in this. These are *cults of realities essential to man*. Noone can deny that the whole of terrestrial life depends on the sun, and to recognize it is poetry." Jorn, "Sience et Matherialisme," pp. 5–6. On p. 7, Jorn claims that the materialist cults that he describes here are identical to popular festivals, which are in turn tied to the rhythms of agricultural labor. Jorn also discusses these views in "La Roue de la fortune: Méthodologie des cultes," trans. Matie van Domselaer and Michel Ragon, the French translation of Jorn's text that was included in Asger Jorn, *Guldhorn og Lykkehjul* (Copenhagen: self-published, n.d. [1957]), pp. 83 and 85. Jorn discusses the development of specialized forms of knowledge by those freed from productive labor on p. 88. On the influence of Engels on Jorn's understanding of early agrarian societies, see Graham Birtwistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art between Helhesten and Cobra (1946–1949)* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986), pp. 149–53.

7. Birtwistle, *Living Art*, pp. 115–16.

8. Lévi-Strauss makes this point in the "Ouverture" to *Le Cru et le cuit*; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology I*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 18–22. For Jorn, a mimetic art was proper to a society of hunters and gatherers, but the return to mimesis in Renaissance art and after was a regression and a mistake. In his annotated copy of *Le Cru et le cuit*, which can be found in the Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Jorn wrote the word *idiot* beside one of Lévi-Strauss's remarks on the essentially mimetic nature of painting (in the 1964 Plon edition, p. 28).

and image, so that images could function independently of text and be arranged according to an order intrinsic to the images themselves; in this arrangement, his own projected series most closely resembles one of the lesser known of Malraux's series, his three-volume *Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (1952–54), in which a short introductory text in each volume prefaces a large collection of photographs of sculpture from different periods and places, with scholarly descriptions of the works found at the back of the volumes.[9]

Jorn was well aware, through Malraux's books and through the Swedish art historian and architect Erik Lundberg's multivolume series *Arkitekturens Formspråk* (The Formal Language of Architecture) (1945–61), of the uses of photographic reproduction in disseminating ideas about art and architecture.[10] There are significant differences, however, between Malraux's use of photography and Jorn's. In both *Psychologie de l'art* (1947–49) and its single-volume revision, *Les Voix du silence* (1951), Malraux claims that black-and-white photography, through its elimination of color, texture, volume, and scale, tends to focus attention on style. When objects lose their material properties through reproduction, when they can be gathered together in the pages of a book and placed in proximity to one another, one can begin to notice similarities in the style of artworks that used to be widely separated in time and space. For Malraux the photographic detail is especially useful in this regard, since it fragments the unity of an artwork that would more likely be perceived as a gestalt or whole by a viewer standing before the original, and in isolation a detail indicates something to the viewer of the reproduction that might otherwise escape notice.[11] In other words, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, the photographs decontextualize artworks as museums do, and Malraux was certainly aware of this when he coined the term *musée imaginaire* for his series.[12]

In contrast to Malraux, Jorn focuses on the motif or gesture rather than on

9. On the separation of plates and text, see Anneli Fuchs, "Asger Jorn and Art History," *Hafnia: Copenhagen Papers in the History of Art* 10 (1985), p. 132, and Ann-Charlotte Weimarck, "'Nordic Anarchism': Asger Jorn and the Project 10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art," the English summary of *'Nordisk Anarkism': Asger Jorn och projektet 10 000 års nordisk folkkonst* (Århus: Kalejdoskop Förlag, 1980), p. 84.

10. Jorn reviewed the first volume of Lundberg's series in 1946, and the entire series up to the fourth volume in 1950; see Asger Jorn, "The Living Essence of the Language of Form" (1946), in *Fraternité avant tout: Asger Jorn's Writings on Art and Architecture*, ed. Ruth Baumeister, trans. Paul Larkin (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2011), pp. 84–102, and Asger Jorn, "Changement d'époque dans la recherche stylistique," in *Discours aux pingouins et autres écrits*, ed. Marie-Anne Sichère, trans. Anne-Catherine Abecassis (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2001), pp. 100–11. Jorn comments approvingly in the latter on the layout of the books.

11. André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls* (1947), vol. 1 of *The Psychology of Art*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), pp. 24 and 50; André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (1951), trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953), pp. 21 and 44.

12. Rosalind Krauss, "The Ministry of Fate," in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 1005–6. Henri Zerner and Douglas Smith also discuss this aspect of Malraux's imaginary museum: see Henri Zerner, "Malraux and the Power of Photography," in *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, ed. Geraldine A. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), p. 117; and Douglas Smith in "Without Walls: 'World Art' and Malraux's Imaginary Museum," in *Cultural Memory: Essays on European Literature and History*, ed. Eric Caldicott and Anne Fuchs (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 181.

style in his choice of images. What he adapts from Malraux is the focus on the significant detail as revealed by the photograph, but what this detail exposes is a motif that might otherwise be overlooked, rather than a style. We see this methodology at work as well in the images chosen for *La Langue verte et la cuite*, when a tongue or tongue-like motif that might otherwise pass unnoticed is highlighted in color. While Malraux tended to select masterworks from museums around the world for his books, Jorn's choices for the Nordic folk-art series are specific to Scandinavia, and are deliberately provincial; his imagery, for the most part known only to locals or to specialists, is often astonishing, but the images are intended to demonstrate the value and interest of Scandinavian popular culture as opposed to the culture of elites.[13]

As Anneli Fuchs and other scholars have shown, Jorn became interested in the ideas of nineteenth-century Danish art historian Julius Lange as he was thinking about how to arrange the material for his Nordic folk-art series in a way that would give at least equal weight to the images as to the text.[14] Lange focused on the motif or gesture in a rather Warburgian way, and in the books in the series that have been published in recent years by Borgen and Walther König according to Jorn's specifications, as well as in the organization of images in *La Langue verte et la cuite*, particular attention is paid to the way the images relate to one another on the level of their motifs; the visual play between images always takes precedence over issues of formal resemblance, the history of the development of a motif, or iconography.[15] The range of materials in each volume of the Nordic folk-art series is, by the nature of its subject, much narrower than in *La Langue verte*, where the corpus of imagery is multicultural; in the latter, Jorn incorporated photographs of objects and images from around the world, including a number of cartoons that he had brought back from a recent visit to Cuba. That said, the majority of the images in *La Langue verte* are of European origin, and just under one quarter come from his archive of photographs for the Nordic folk-art project.

It should be noted that this project was stillborn, as Jorn was unable to persuade funding agencies to support the project unless he relinquished control of its overall direction—and over the presentation of images in particular, which others found eccentric. Jorn produced one volume as a pilot, in order to give potential

13. Michel Melot notes the academic and conventional nature of Malraux's choices of artworks in "André Malraux, du Musée imaginaire à l'Inventaire général," in *André Malraux, D'un siècle l'autre: Actes du colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle*, ed. Jean-Claude Larrat and Jacques Lecarme (S.l.: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 256–57.

14. Fuchs, "Asger Jorn and Art History," pp. 139, 141–43, and Peter Shield, "An Artist's World-View: The Writings of Asger Jorn," *Asger Jorn* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), pp. 288–89.

15. Fuchs, "Asger Jorn and Art History," p. 142. Recently, the Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König has published six volumes of the series in association with the Museum Jorn (then the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum), where the archival materials are held, and Borgen reissued the 1965 pilot volume in 1995. (Borgen also published the Scandinavian-language versions of the series, which are appearing in German or English through König.) This is as many volumes as Jorn's increasingly sketchy directions for the series will allow.

investors a proper idea of what he had in mind, but rather than lose control of the project, he chose to shut it down in 1965.[16]

However, Jorn published a related book in 1964, *Signes gravés sur les églises de l'Eure et du Calvados*. This was the second volume of a series Jorn edited called the Alexandrian Library: a series of Situationist pamphlets made up volume one, and *La Langue verte* was volume three. *Signes* focused on graffiti carved into the stone interiors of Norman churches between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries, which it presented as an unofficial culture contributed over the centuries by worshippers, as they attended Mass or visited the churches for other purposes.[17] Jorn was drawn to this graffiti for several reasons. On one level, he saw a resemblance between the kinds of marks made in these Norman churches over several centuries and the graffiti found in Scandinavian churches, which implies the persistence of cultural ties between Normandy, settled by Scandinavian peoples, and the cultural heritage of his homeland. (While Jorn was not a nationalist, he saw a specificity to Scandinavian culture that he wished to make available to others.) On another level, he was drawn to this graffiti as a popular expression that is also a commentary on, and a supplement to, the official culture of the Catholic Church.

For *Signes*, Jorn solicited texts from scholars, and wrote an important one himself; these texts are interpolated with full-page photographs of the graffiti, which are nearly all figurative rather than verbal. The images punctuate the essays, which refer to them, but they are not a function of the texts; rather, they are on an equal footing. Supporting visual materials drawn from other sources are shown facing the texts, but the photographs of the Norman graffiti are always displayed as full-page spreads, uninterrupted by text other than a number that refers to a table at the back of the book indicating the site of the graffiti. The photographs also focus on details and motifs without situating them in the architectural context of the churches in which they were found. This is one of the Malrucian features of Jorn and Franceschi's approach: to emphasize a significant detail through a close-up, which is what the photographic art of technical reproduction allows.

Such an approach is also taken in the Nordic folk-art series and in *La Langue verte*. In his presentation of the series, Jorn's thinking about the relation of part to whole is closely associated with his social thinking, wherein society ought to be a structural support for the individual, rather than the individual being subordinated to the needs of society. Emphasized here is a way of thinking

16. Anneli Fuchs, "Roots and Perspectives: Asger Jorn and Traditions in Art," trans. Annette Mester, in *Asger Jorn* (Ishøj: Arken Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 107.

17. The graffiti has often been described as Viking, but there are quite a few images, for instance of rigged sailing ships, that bear no resemblance to Viking ships, as well as a few words in Roman script. One of the contributors to the book, Norwegian ethnographer Gutorm Gjessing, dates the graffiti to between 1110 and 1800, noting that several inscriptions are dated to the eighteenth century. Gutorm Gjessing, "Nord et Normandie," *Signes gravés sur les églises de l'Eure et du Calvados* (Copenhagen: Éditions Borgen, 1964), pp. 35 and 39.

about the relation of detail to structure, or of individual to society, that also bears on Jorn's critique of structuralism.[18]

Much of Jorn's own written and visual work takes the form of a commentary on the work of others. As in his *Modification* and *Défiguration* series of paintings of 1959 and 1962, respectively, and in his critique of Marx's concept of value in his own *Critique de la politique économique*, published as a Situationist pamphlet in 1960, it is an active response to that work, rather than a passive reception and absorption. In a similar way, *La Langue verte* is an active response to and commentary on structuralism, and on Lévi-Strauss's *Le Cru et le cuit* in particular. This response produces something quite different from what prompted it; the source text or image gives shape or structure to the commentary, even as their possible meanings diverge.

Jorn first addressed structuralism in an article titled "Strukturalisme og Fortielse" (Structuralism and Suppression), published in the Danish periodical *Kriterium* in September 1967. He is critical of structuralism for "*excluding the human being* by claiming the human being was nothing other than an invention of the natural sciences that is no longer needed. *The human being is that which the structuralists must not discuss*, if they are to structure the human sciences."[19] Here Jorn also quotes Lévi-Strauss from his 1965 essay "Le Triangle culinaire": "Thus we can hope to discover . . . how the cooking of a society is a language through which it unconsciously translates its structure."[20]

It is these concerns that orient Jorn's conception of *La Langue verte*, the third sentence of which reads: "Strictly personal, this book evidently does not exist, since by definition that which [*ce qui*] does not exist is no one [*personne*], and no one can exist at the present hour."[21] It is significant that the organization of Jorn and Arnaud's own book turns on the orientation to cooking taken by Lévi-Strauss rather than to a general principle of structuralist method. This relation of one book to another, in addition to being a form of commentary, is itself a nearly structuralist opposition, which depends, however, on several conceptual differences important to Jorn in particular: on a philosophical and practical materialism, through which art is a practice in, and on, the real; on the idea of an experimental knowledge or *connaissance*, achieved through an engagement with empirical matter; and on the notion of a visual thinking that is independent of language. In a brief unpublished and undated text (which is given the approximate date of 1972 by the Museum Jorn), Jorn writes:

> Why did we make *La Langue verte et la cuite?* First because the tongue as a subject of visual art is fascinating and much more varied than still

18. Asger Jorn, "Description préliminaire du dispositif et du plan pour la publication de 10 000 ans d'art populaire nordique" (1965), in Jorn, *Discours aux pingouins*, p. 346.

19. Asger Jorn, "Structuralism and Suppression," trans. Niels Henriksen, in this issue. The article was originally published in *Kriterium* 2 no. 4 (September 1967), pp. 6–8.

20. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," trans. Peter Brooks, *Partisan Review* 33, no. 4 (Fall 1966), p. 595; quoted by Jorn in "Structuralism and Suppression." "Le Triangle culinaire" was first published in French in *L'Arc* 26 (1965).

21. Asger Jorn and Noël Arnaud, *La Langue verte et la cuite: Étude gastrophonique sur la marmythologie musiculinaire* (S.I.: Jean-Jacques Pauvert Éditeur, 1968), p. 11. In French, *qui* can signify both "that" and "who," depending on the context, and Jorn plays on this ambiguity here.

> lifes, and these images have never been shown together, and then because the linguists are seriously beginning to plague us [*nous casser les pieds*]. It was time to leave this "too defensive a posture against the power of words," with which John E. Burchard reproaches artists in his chapter on "The City as Symbol" in *Sign, Image and Symbol.*[22]

In other words, there is a relation in Jorn's mind between the critique of structuralism and an emphasis on the visual image. Jorn's materialist orientation presupposes human agency, which is threatened by structuralist theory. Indeed, an essential component of the beliefs grounding Jorn's artistic practice is that the artist gives shape to matter and eventually to an image that is prior to language.

The differences that Jorn draws between structuralism and his own values appear in *La Langue verte* as an excess to the structure, which is related to a corporal embodiment that the authors believe to be absent from structuralism. Lévi-Strauss's interest in cooking seems to be based primarily on his insight that it is a universal human activity that can be diagrammed and thus understood conceptually in a way similar to that other human universal, language. Lévi-Strauss's "Le Triangle culinaire," for instance, is largely concerned with diagramming structural oppositions between food in its raw state and in different states of cooking and decomposition, which he describes by adapting Roman Jakobson's "vowel triangle" and "consonant triangle" (by which phonemes become significant through a structure of difference) to the "culinary triangle" of the title. Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss opens the "Ouverture" to *Le Cru et le cuit* with these words:

> The aim of this book is to show how empirical categories—such as the categories of the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed, the moistened and the burned, etc., which can only be accurately defined by ethnographic observation and, in each instance, by adopting the standpoint of a particular culture—can nonetheless be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas and combine them in the form of propositions.[23]

That is, Lévi-Strauss is ordering empirical data using a structuralist method, and this grounding in practices of cooking, eating, and drinking, and in Amerindian myths about the origins of these practices, itself structures the relations between *La Langue verte* and *Le Cru et le cuit.*

One of the initial themes of *La Langue verte*, adapted from *Le Cru et le cuit*, is that of the *dénicheur des langues*, the "dislodger of tongues," which is both described as a myth in Jorn and Arnaud's text and displayed as a motif in numer-

22. Asger Jorn, untitled and undated typescript (1972?), 4 pp., in Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. Jorn is quoting John E. Burchard's essay "The City as Symbol" in *Sign, Image and Symbol*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (London: Studio Vista, 1966), p. 236.

23. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit* (S.I.: Plon, 1964), p. 1; Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 1.

ous images—in fact, 102 of the 315 images in the book are included under the rubric of *héros dénicheurs de langues* in the "Service de table des enluminures" at the back of the volume.[24] (The *dénicheurs des langues* are a variation on the *dénicheurs* in one of the first myths described in Lévi-Strauss's book, concerning the "bird-nesters" of the Bororo tribe in the Mato Grosso state of western Brazil, who rob nests of young macaws.[25]) As the authors write in *La Langue verte*, the "heroes dislodgers of tongues" are those in structuralist linguistics who separate the human being from language:



Plate from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968.*

> The relation between tongue [*langue*] and language [*langage*] merits examination. The tongue is language less speech [*parole*]. To extract one's tongue, it is therefore necessary to cut off one's speech, which one achieves in a radical manner by cutting out the whole tongue. This carnage of the tongue is called language. The operation itself is called *langagement*.[26]

Here Jorn and Arnaud are playfully taking up the Saussurean distinction accepted by Lévi-Strauss between *langue* as system and *parole* as speech—as well as, secondarily, Sartre's notion of commitment (*l'engagement*).[27] Their critique of the sep-

24. One of the many untranslatable examples of wordplay in *La Langue verte et la cuite*, this expression condenses the *service de table* or "dinner service" and the *table des enluminures* or "table of illuminations," *enluminure* also signifying the coloring of the tongues in the same way that a print may be printed in different colors.

25. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, pp. 35–47. In the 1964 Plon version read by Jorn, the relevant pages are pp. 43–55. *Dénicheurs* is the French term, "bird-nesters" its translation.

26. Jorn and Arnaud, p. 48. *Langagement* is literally "languagement," but it sounds like the Sartrean term *l'engagement* ("commitment").

27. Lévi-Strauss refers to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* in two places that would have been easily accessible to Jorn and Arnaud: in "The Structural Study of Myth," first published in English in 1955 and included in *Structural Anthropology* (1958), trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf (S.l.: Basic Books, 1963), p. 209; and in Lévi-Strauss's 1960 *Leçon inaugurale* for the



Tout homme d'esprit qui bâtit commence sagement par fonder la cuisine.
RABELAIS

5

Plate from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968.*

aration of language from the human animal is made in two ways. One is through the predominance of the visual over the verbal in the book, which *shows* the tongue as an implicit critique of structuralism's privileging of language—although the text is full of exuberant wordplay, and offers up its own mythical narratives to complement and parody those that Lévi-Strauss has gathered in *Le Cru et le cuit.* The other is through an insistence, both verbal and visual, on the tongue in all of its functions—eating, drinking, vomiting, speaking, kissing, or being shown in a spirit of derision. If myths about cooking are the basis of Lévi-Strauss's study, they are for Lévi-Strauss "structured like a language," a point of view that Jorn and Arnaud counter with the unruly tongue of their title, which is language but also more than language—language as but one function of a Rabelaisian body.[28]

This raises the possibility of a Bakhtinian analysis of *La Langue verte* as a carnivalesque response to structuralist theory. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, first published in the Soviet Union in 1965, had not yet been translated into French by the time of *La Langue verte*'s appearance, though Julia Kristeva had introduced his work to a French public in an important article published in

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Collège de France, published as "The Scope of Anthropology," trans. Monique Layton in *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 17. Lévi-Strauss famously critiqued Sartre in the last section of *La Pensée sauvage* (1962), which is probably why Jorn and Arnaud are bringing Lévi-Strauss and Sartre together here.

28. The image of a tongue being used as a musical instrument, which comes from a book of engravings of grotesque figures entitled *Les Songes drolatiques de Pantagruel*, is the first one in the book, the epigraph reading: "Any intelligent man who builds begins wisely by starting with the kitchen." Jorn and Arnaud, p. 5. The caption specifies that the image comes from a book, published by Richard Breton in Paris in 1565, of 120 engravings of figures purporting to have been invented by Rabelais. This is the first of nine images from this source used in *La Langue verte et la cuite.*

Critique in April 1967.[29] Arnaud was a contributor to *Critique*, and therefore may have read this text. However, Kristeva introduced Bakhtin as a member of the formalist circle (which he was not), and analyzed his work from a structuralist perspective, so it is unlikely that Bakhtin's thinking would have been available to either Jorn or Arnaud as an alternative to structuralist theory.[30] In any case, a knowledge of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque was not necessary in order for Jorn and Arnaud to conceive their book; the *Cahiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique* had published special issues on "Rabelais pataphysicien" and "Jarry pantagruéliste" in 1954, and an interest in Rabelais was shared with other pataphysicians like Raymond Queneau in the 1950s and '60s.[31]

Even if Jorn lacked direct knowledge of *Rabelais and His World* and his "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1975), Bakhtin's theories can be useful in understanding the orientation of *La Langue verte et la cuite*. Bakhtin insists that both the language and the viewpoint of Rabelais's fiction enter literature from a popular consciousness, rather than from elite or official culture. For Bakhtin, they are related in a fundamental way to the seasonal rhythms of agricultural labor and to the commerce of the town fair, as well as to the festivals that still punctuated everyday life in sixteenth-century France. In other words, Bakhtin's is a class analysis, through which he argues convincingly that the emphasis on the material in Rabelais, as opposed to the spiritual and ideal of the religious and aristocratic communities that made up the official culture of the time, is closely related to popular experience in towns or on estates.

In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin argues that labor processes are oriented to harvest and birth, and throughout *Rabelais and His World* he claims that folk or popular cultures are closely related to nature, in ways that aristocratic, clerical, and, later, bourgeois conceptions of culture are not.[32] Bakhtin understands the human body to be open to the world, and one of the figures of this openness in Rabelais's fiction is the mouth, through which food and drink flow (and from which vomit issues in moments of excess): "But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all

29. Julia Kristeva, "Le Mot, le dialogue et le roman," translated as "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1967) in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University, 1982), pp. 64–91. The article was first published in *Critique* 33 (April 1967).

30. The English translation of *Rabelais and His World* was published in 1968, the French one in 1970. For a helpful discussion of Bakhtin's reception, including Kristeva's, see Karine Zbinden, *Bakhtin between East and West: Cross-Cultural Transmission* (London: Legenda, 2006).

31. The *Cahiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique* 13–14 (March 9, 1954) was devoted to "Rabelais pataphysicien" and to "Jarry pantagruéliste" in issue 15 (April 14, 1954). Raymond Queneau alludes to Rabelais in his novel *Les Fleurs bleues* (1965). Bakhtin mentions Jarry as an example of the modern grotesque in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1984), p. 46.

32. M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975), ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 206–07.

else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss."[33]

Popular language also issues from the mouth, of course, in shouts, curses, and wordplay, which Bakhtin finds of great interest in *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, an early instance of vernacular literature in France.[34] Laughter, too, comes from the mouth, and Bakhtin sees parody and the grotesque as essential features of the literature he is investigating:

> Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people's festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.[35]

This for Bakhtin is one of the dimensions of the popular consciousness that inform Rabelais's fiction. Exaggeration and hyperbole are two of the qualities of parody and the grotesque, which debase the ideal and the hierarchy of official culture into the material of unofficial popular culture: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."[36] The giants Gargantua and Pantagruel exemplify these qualities in their size and their actions, despite the fact that they are also princes.

Although *La Langue verte et la cuite* is a parody of structuralist theory, as well as of the musical and scientific pretensions of *Le Cru et le cuit*, it also adopts Lévi-Strauss's method in the organization of its images and prose. The permutations of images of the tongue—which are broadly organized in the "table service of illuminations" into *héros dénicheurs de langues*, *la langue pédale* (roughly, "foot lickers"), *tireurs* (those who show their tongues), *les langues élémentales* (the elements in question being chiefly air and fire), *la langue orientable* (in which tongues take the form of vegetal arabesques), *la langue zoomorphe* (which are mostly snakes, but on two occasions frogs), *bi-langues*, and *tri-langues*—are transformational in nature. So, for instance, the series of images of dislodgers of tongues begins with the "heroes"

33. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 317; see also p. 26.
34. Ibid., pp. 15–17 and p. 182.
35. Ibid., p. 12. The first trait of laughter according to Bakhtin is that this laughter is festive and therefore collective, rather than individual.
36. Ibid., pp. 19–20. He also writes: "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style." Ibid., p. 303.



Plate from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968.*

"dislodging" the tongues of dragons; it then shifts to images of heroes forcing open an animal's jaws (a traditional sign of strength and courage), which are followed by human hands being grasped in the mouths of beasts—a literal inversion of the hero's domination in the earlier images. This series of transformations is in keeping with Lévi-Strauss's account of how myths spread in Amerindian societies through a logic of difference.

The text is organized according to a different logic of development than that found in the "table service of illuminations." The table of contents is set up as a menu, with each dish an example of wordplay whose name often incorporates both musical and gastronomic references (for instance, "Pizzicato al pommo d'oro" and "Elégie au fromage blanc"). The texts that have been given the names of individual dishes are modular, and they develop over the course of the book as a series of *dismythes* and *marmythes.*[37]

The musical references in the book's organization refer of course to Lévi-Strauss's own use of musical terms to structure the four volumes of his *Mythologiques* series, whose first volume was *Le Cru et le cuit.* Lévi-Strauss uses similar titles in the organization of his chapters (e.g., "Fugue des cinq sens," "Cantate de la sarigue" [opossum]—which later shows up as "Cantate des seringues" [syringes] in Jorn and Arnaud's book). Lévi-Strauss adopts a musical structure because he believes myth and music to be organized in similar ways, but he keeps the structure of his book and the contents of the myths he discusses separate; in the organization of their book, Jorn and Arnaud integrate the content of those myths as two forms of pleasure.[38] The difference is subtle but of great importance, for Jorn and Arnaud's synthesis acts as a critique of the separation they see informing Lévi-Strauss's structuralist method. Within the texts, Jorn mimetically adopts the same academic rhetorical devices that Lévi-Strauss frequently relies on ("Mais il y a plus" [But there is more], "La démonstration peut être poussée encore plus loin" [The proof can be

37. The marmythes continue the parody of *The Raw and the Cooked*: *marmite* is the French word for "cooking pot."

38. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit*, pp. 34–35; *The Raw and the Cooked*, p. 26.

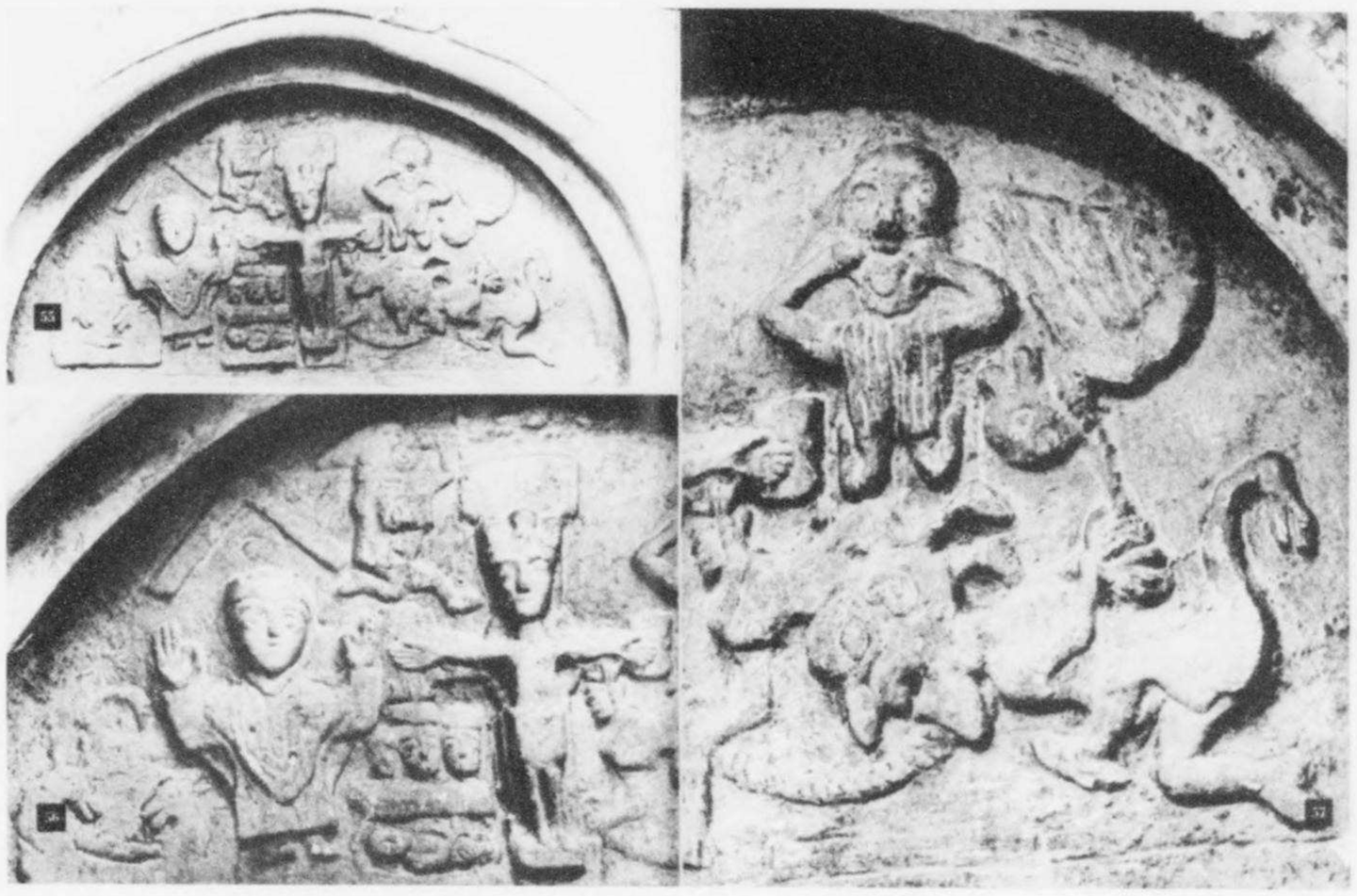


Plate from 12th-Century Stone Sculptures of Scania. *1965.*

pushed even further], etc.), which he noted in his copy of *Le Cru et le cuit*, and which serve to tie the parody more closely to its model.[39]

Jorn and Arnaud's emphasis on the embodied tongue, a response to a disembodied structuralist discourse that has eliminated the human being from its reasoning, takes the form of a Joycean excess of language and of images that bear witness to orality. For Bakhtin the mouth has symbolic value as an opening to the world, especially in those cultures and for those classes involved in agricultural labor that are most dependent on nature, and Jorn seems to share Bakhtin's viewpoint.[40] If the variety of these nonverbal images of the mouth and tongue initially fascinated Jorn—he may first have noticed the motif when collecting photographs for the Nordic folk-art series (as, for instance, in a remarkable image of a figure showing his tongue at a crucifixion, found in both *La Langue verte* and *12th-Century Stone Sculptures of Scania* (*Skånes Stenskulptur under 1100-tallet*), Jorn's 1965 pilot volume for the Nordic folk-art series)—he offers them as a response to the structuralist reduction of *la langue* (the tongue) to language. This is so even if the organization of the images in the book is sometimes based on shifts in sounds and meaning in language—for example, from *la langue forgée* (the forged tongue) of one image to *la langue fourchue* (the forked tongue) of several later images, and to the *bi-langue* of yet others, which sometimes takes on the properties of the plant

39. Jorn underlined all of these figures of speech in his copy of *Le Cru et le cuit*, and used them liberally in his own text.

40. Significantly, Lévi-Strauss also discusses laughter and eating as openings to the world, in *Le Cru et le cuit*, pp. 133–34; *The Raw and the Cooked*, pp. 125–26.

motifs in decorative arabesques. Extending the visual logic at work here, in some images the leafy tongues suggest intoxication, as in the image captioned, "Bilinguiste viniculaire éméché" (tipsy vinicular bilinguist).

Intoxication has a positive value for Jorn and Arnaud, and Jorn in fact describes it as "natural aesthetics" in his 1952 book *Luck and Chance*:

> *Bacchus, Dionysius, Liber* and our Nordic *Frø* all personify this ancient principle of intoxication or natural aesthetics which is, indeed, *the divine origin of the concept of freedom itself.* But it is very significant to point out that these are above all symbols of fertility, work, love and liberation, showing that *true freedom to consist of liberation into life, not of freeing oneself from life,* as is normally maintained in the modern presupposition of unproductive independence, where freedom means passivity.[41]





Plates from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968.*

Jorn's painting *Dead Drunk Danes,* 1960, its title an allusion to Shakespeare's line "your Dane dead drunk" from *Othello,* is another instance of this, though it is also in keeping with the Rabelaisian theme of banqueting that runs through *La Langue verte et la cuite.*[42] The title of the painting appears to be a response to a remark made by U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower at an address to fellow Republicans on July 27, 1960:

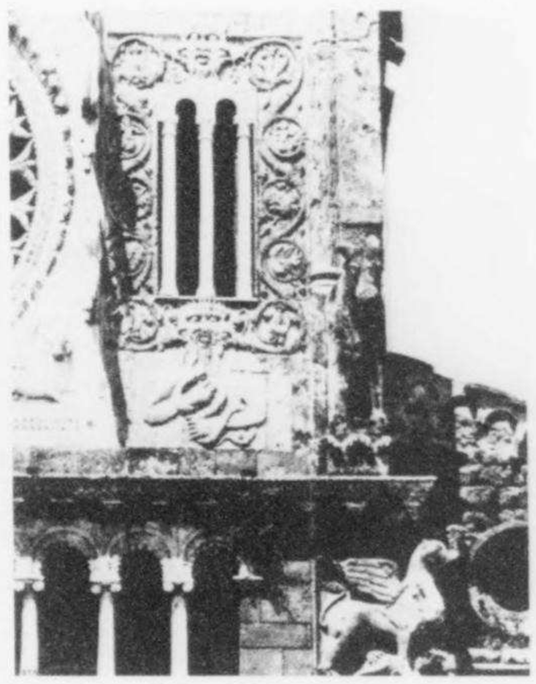
> Only in the last few weeks, I have been reading quite an article on the experiment of almost complete paternalism in a friendly European country. This country has a tremendous record for socialistic opera-

41. Asger Jorn, *Luck and Chance: Dagger and Guitar* (1952, revised 1963), in *The Natural Order and Other Texts,* trans. Peter Shield (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 273. This last remark would seem to refer to the passivity and atomization of the consumer in consumer society, a point of view shared with Jorn's once and future comrades in the Situationist International.

42. Iago: "Why, he drinks you with facility your Dane dead drunk. He sweats not to overthrow your Almain. He gives your Hollander a vomit ere the next pottle can be filled." This very Rabelaisian speech, from Act 2, Scene 3 of *Othello,* vaunts the superiority of Englishmen where drinking is concerned.

tion, following a socialistic philosophy, and the record shows that their rate of suicide has gone up almost unbelievably and I think they were almost the lowest nation in the world for that. Now, they have more than twice our rate. Drunkenness has gone up. Lack of ambition is discernible on all sides. Therefore, with that kind of example, let's always remember Lincoln's admonition. Let's do in the federal government only those things that people themselves cannot do at all, or cannot so well do in their individual capacities.[43]







These remarks were widely reported in the Scandinavian press. Eisenhower did not name the country he was referring to, but Jorn's title—with its reference to drunken Danes—reads as a playfully intertextual response to it.

While there is a necessarily close relation between word and image in *La Langue verte*—given that language is a property of the tongue—much of the book is focused on the visual relationships between images, independent of text, which they do not illustrate. For Jorn images are not dependent on words, and have had a long history of use independent of language; one reason for his interest in the graffiti found in Norman and Scandinavian churches is that they are figurative rather than verbal, possibly because the worshippers who carved them into wood and stone were not literate.[44] In 1965 Jorn titled a painting *Im Anfang war das Bild* (In the Beginning Was the Image), inverting in an obvious way the intent of the first words of the Gospel of John to indicate the precedence of image over language. As Jorn's biographer Troels Andersen notes:

> Traditional iconography compares motifs that "illustrate" known sto-

43. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the Republican National Committee Breakfast, Chicago, Illinois." This address was given at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago on July 27, 1960. It can be found online at *The American Presidency Project*, presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11891 (accessed April 15, 2012). I am grateful to Howard L. Pankratz, archivist at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, Kansas, for indicating this source to me.

44. There are a few photographs of inscriptions in *Signes gravés*, but the vast majority of the graffiti in the book is exclusively figurative in nature.

> ries such as classical myths, Biblical tales or accounts of historical events. Jorn's approach was different. He rejected the accepted notion among scholars that an image illustrates a pre-existing, verbally formulated content, whether transmitted orally or in writing. Instead he proposed the hypothesis that a pictorial representation may generate a verbally expressed myth.[45]

Jorn was for this reason extremely interested in the cultural tradition of the *husdrapa*, in which Nordic bards constructed poetic improvisations based on images. Images are thus prior to their interpretation in words, rather than second-order phenomena.[46]

As a critique of structuralism's privileging of language over other forms of expression and other aspects of human behavior, *La Langue verte* attempts to readjust the balance between word and image by insisting on the inseparability of the two meanings of *langue*. Jorn and Arnaud link them graphically through the identical coloring of titles and of tongues on each page where titles are found, connecting rather than separating the two. Thus the tongue is sometimes literally green, though at other times it is pink, blue, yellow, or orange. This is the *image* of language (*langue*)—how it shows itself, how it looks.

I noted earlier that Arnaud was a regent (and later satrap) in the College of 'Pataphysics. Invented by Alfred Jarry in the 1890s (and institutionalized by the College in 1948), pataphysics, "the science of exceptions" or "the science of imaginary solutions," is noted for its ironic adoption of scientific procedures. While Jorn was ambivalent about pataphysics and, despite the claims of many scholars, was never a member of the College, there is nonetheless a pataphysical quality to *La Langue verte et la cuite*.[47] In the manuscript version of a text prepared for the *Magazine littéraire*, which was published in a shortened version in February 1969, Arnaud noted:

> A methodology has been made of a method (that of Lévi-Strauss). . . . Then, as always happens with ideas that become dogmatic, what we call in our book a methodotautology has come to be made of the methodology; in other words, the endless repetition of the same idea of

45. Troels Andersen, "Thidrek," in *Asger Jorn* (Ishøj: Arken Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 139.

46. On the *husdrapa*, see Weimarck, p. 87.

47. Jorn was honored with the title of *commandeur exquis* of the Order of the Grande Gidouille by the College in 1961, after his resignation from the Situationist International, but this was an honor bestowed on members and nonmembers alike, and Jorn neither subscribed to the College's publications nor occupied any position in its hierarchy. E-mail correspondence with Thieri Foulc, regent of the Collège de 'Pataphysique, February 16, 2009. An article by Jorn that was rather critical of pataphysics, "La Pataphysique, une religion en formation," was published in *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), pp. 29–32, after his resignation, together with an editorial note clarifying the Situationists' position on pataphysics; the date of this publication, following the announcement of Jorn's award in the *Dossiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique* 15 (which appeared in late June 1961), is perhaps a sign of a strategic move against the College by the Situationist group that was designed to embarrass Jorn.

> method in regards to no matter what. Pataphysically speaking, it does not displease us in the least that a simple scientific hypothesis has been set up as a Table of the Law. Science, and culture in general, are above all administration. Culture is administered as one administers the Holy Sacrament and as one administers a potion, and, of course, as one administers the State. Culture is the police of the spirit. A naive person can find it astonishing that Lautréamont, Rimbaud and even Dada have become the topic of theses at the Sorbonne. To us it's not. The Sorbonne congratulates itself on having good digestion. And indeed, it swallows everything, in hoping that everything it hands back will be something unrecognizable. Structuralism is undeniably neater. It's the dietetic, hygienic Sorbonne. Lévi-Strauss's culinary obsession is, in this regard, quite symptomatic. And it's this, in the end, that makes him extremely sympathetic.[48]

Lévi-Strauss's culinary obsession makes him sympathetic to Arnaud, and this despite the universal application of his method. It is not in fact the universality of this application that is the problem for Arnaud, but its truth claims, for pataphysics is the science of exceptions, where any law is only applicable to a single instance; consequently, there are no universal laws or truths, and structuralism, with its claim to the scientific status of a *savoir* or theoretical knowledge, is just as imaginary a solution as any other. This is the challenge pataphysics makes to science, even while scientific procedures are scrupulously followed in the research published in the College's own periodicals over the sixty-plus years of its existence. At the same time, the concept of pataphysics, as established by Jarry, is founded on the notion of equivalence, of nothing's being, in itself, more or less true than anything else, and this brings it close to the differential logic of structuralist method, for which it is the differences between myths that are significant, rather than the veracity or content of specific myths.[49] It is this aspect of equivalence, I think, that informs the organization of the photographs in *La Langue verte et la cuite.*

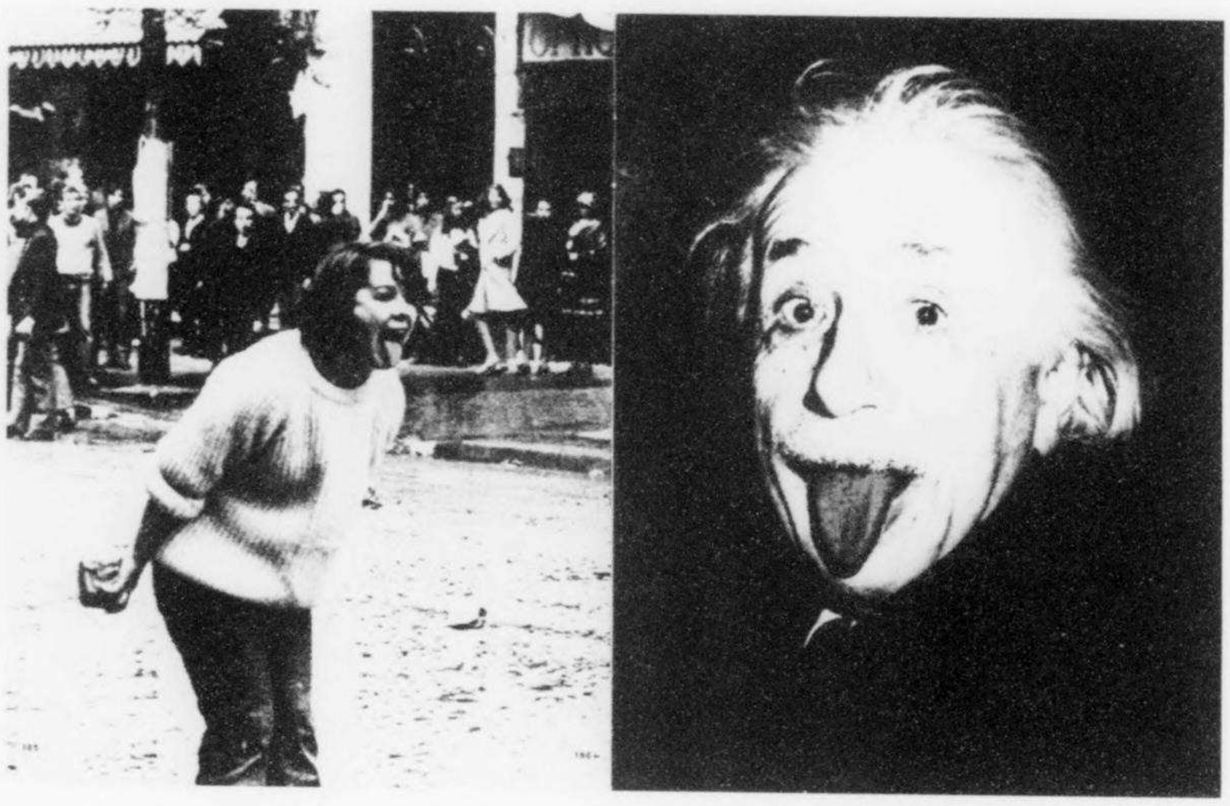
In the interview that was the basis for Pierre Hahn's article in the *Magazine littéraire*, Arnaud notes that "Lévi-Strauss affirms that 'there can be nothing arbitrary in works of the mind,'" and goes on to say: "For, as you have understood, we are passionately though imperturbably for the arbitrary in works of the mind,

48. Noël Arnaud, manuscript of an interview with Pierre Hahn, January 17, 1969, in Asger Jorn and Noël Arnaud, *La Langue verte et la cuite: Manuscrits, photographies et documents originaux* (Toulouse: Librarie Champavert, 2002), pp. 64–65. (Note: This is the catalogue for the sale of the manuscripts for *La Langue verte et la cuite*, which are now in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris.) The interview was used as the basis for Pierre Hahn, "Argot, structuralisme et gastronomie," *Magazine littéraire* 26 (February 1969), p. 24.

49. Arnaud writes about the pataphysical notion of equivalence in "Mythe du mythe et science des sciences," *Le Monde*, November 29, 1967.

for caprice, for delirium and for the absolute sovereignty of the imaginary."[50] This pataphysical preference for the arbitrary—for the exception rather than the rule—is what Arnaud brings to the book, in addition to his erudition, his excellent French, and his gastronomic interests. As a founding member of Oulipo, or the "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," Arnaud was also interested in structures, but ones consciously devised as rules for literary games, rather than the unconscious structures investigated by structuralists. He notes, in a later interview with Warren F. Motte, Jr., that Oulipo and structuralism share quite a lot, but that there is this significant difference.[51]

In keeping with the pataphysical attitude towards science, it is a matter of



Left: Two plates from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968. Photographs by Manuel Bidermanas/akg-image and Arthur Sasse/AFP/Getty Images.*
Right: Jorn. Pas de puisance d'imagination sans images puisante. *1968.*

course that *La Langue verte* includes Arthur Sasse's now-famous UPI photograph of Albert Einstein showing his tongue on his seventy-second birthday, next to a photograph from the weekly magazine *L'Express* of a young woman on the streets of Paris in May 1968, captioned, "La Langue universitaire pavée de bonnes intentions" ("The university tongue paved with good intentions"—*pavée* is the verb here, but a *pavé* is also a cobblestone, which she holds in her hand).[52] This is the only reference to the recent events that had shaken French society so thoroughly—indeed, the only reference to current events generally—in a book that appeared five months after the May revolt.[53] While its publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert was closely involved in the events, Jorn, according to his former girlfriend

50. Arnaud, interview with Hahn, p. 65.
51. Warren F. Motte, Jr., "Twenty Questions for Noël Arnaud," *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature* 10 no. 2 (Spring 1986), p. 293.
52. The photograph, taken by the photojournalist Manuel Bidermanas, was first published as part of a suite of six photographs of police repression and student resistance in *L'Express*, May 13–19, 1968.
53. With one other exception: there is a drawing by Roland Topor of the head of a gagged man, whose forehead opens to stick out a tongue, which evidently connotes the mind's ability to resist even where speech is prohibited. The drawing, which was published in *Action* 9 (June 13, 1968), p. 2, is reproduced in small dimensions on p. 156 of *La Langue verte*. (*Action* was a newspaper

Jacqueline de Jong, remained far away from them in the suburbs.[54] He nevertheless produced a series of four posters in solidarity with the May–June events, which were as he says "conscientiously misspelled."[55] These posters take the form of a commentary on the May–June events, as well as on the posters produced by the *Ateliers populaires* in the occupied art and design schools in Paris and elsewhere, which featured simple graphics and slogans oriented to the demands of workers and students in the occupied factories and universities and in the streets.



Jorn's own posters are also a combination of word and image, though their slogans, such as "Pas de puisance d'imagination sans images puisante" (No power of the imagination without powerful images), which refers to the 1968 slogan "L'Imagination au pouvoir" (All power to the imagination), differ from those of the Ateliers populaires, as do their images. Jorn was one of a number of artists who made posters in solidarity with the May events but who declined to take part in the anonymous production of the Ateliers populaires for reasons both aesthetic and political. There is no question that, in the economy of *La Langue verte et la cuite*, the image of the woman showing her tongue is a positive one, precisely as

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published by the Comités d'action organizing resistance to the regime, and featured many cartoons by different hands, including regular contributions by Topor.) However, the drawing's reference to the May–June events is not explicit, whereas the subject of Bidermanas's photograph would have been instantly recognizable at the time of publication.

54. "Interview with Jacqueline de Jong by Graham Birtwistle," in Luciano Caprile, *Asger Jorn*, vol. 2 (Milano: Skira, 1996), pp. 524–25.

55. Asger Jorn, untitled and undated manuscript, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.



Page from La Langue verte et la cuite. *1968. © Pierre Alechinsky/SODRAC 2012.*

a gesture of derision aimed at power, part of a long-standing popular tradition that Jorn and Arnaud are highlighting here. There is a whole section of *La Langue verte* devoted to *tireurs de langue*, which is an instance of corporal humor aimed at authority, and the book's final image is a drawing the former Cobra artist Pierre Alechinsky made for the cover of *Les Tireurs de langue*, the book on which he collaborated with the Israeli writer Amos Kenan.[56]

It is important to emphasize that Jorn and Arnaud's book is a response to structuralism from the viewpoint of artists; it therefore differs from the intellectual critiques made by Claude Lefort, Henri Lefebvre, and others in the 1950s and '60s. One of the key aspects of Jorn and Arnaud's response is an expansive humor—derisive, parodic, but also generous. It is not, in other words, a humor that treats either its object of parody or its audience as an idiot; it is, rather, an inclusive humor, a carnivalesque attitude as described by Bakhtin. In their critique of the separation that informs structuralism's logic of difference, Jorn and Arnaud focus on a materialist knowledge gained through the senses (a *connaissance* rather than a *savoir*), placing an emphasis on the unruly human animal rather than on a system. They focus on synthesis rather than on distinction, bringing images together in often astonishing ways that are both in keeping with Lévi-Strauss's notion of transformational structures and different from it. They enact their own logic of difference in differentiating themselves from a differential logic, which is and is not parodic in nature.

56. Published in 1962 by Fratelli Pozzo—the same printers that produced *La Langue verte et la cuite* for Pauvert.

Masculine Resistance: Expressions and Experiences of Gender in the Work of Asger Jorn*

HELLE BRØNS

Asger Jorn's art practice was fueled by the combustion of opposites—artistic, human, and theoretical—that often remained as paradoxes in his thinking. A significant clash of this kind happened in 1964, when Jorn engaged in a heated debate about art, gender, and society with Elsa Gress, a Danish writer, feminist, and social commentator. The polemic developed over several newspaper articles and sent sparks flying in the Danish public sphere, as both antagonists radicalized their opinions (ultimately Gress accused Jorn of fascist masculinism and Jorn charged Gress with "unintelligent old wives' talk"). The debate is significant because it brings to the surface gender themes that are a subtext in much of Jorn's work, while also raising questions about the nature of his views on art and philosophy.

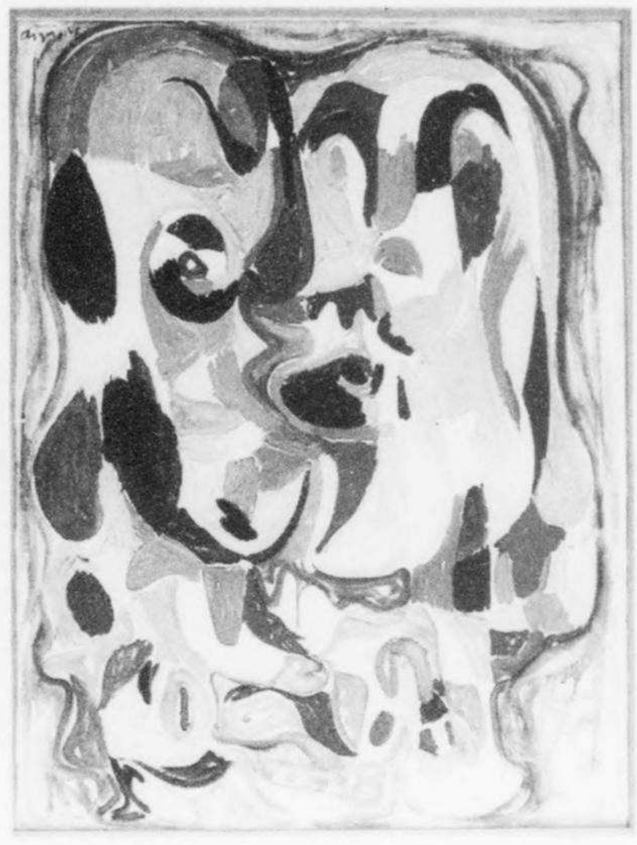
Gender is a recurring theme in Jorn's writing as well as his painting. His imagery includes erotic scenes, as in *Love Battle: Cherchez la femme* (1954), in which several potent men flock around a woman whose sex is the picture's central focus, or the more romantic series of Didaska paintings (1944–45), in which pairs of figures playfully intertwine. There are also dramatic images of conflict between couples; in *Bridal Couple* (1953), for example, the pair is marked with ominous black streaks. More fundamental investigations of masculinity can be perceived in paintings such as *The Berserk Are Among Us* and *The Hero Beast*, both from 1962, in which men are transformed into snarling creatures, and animal forms appear, like X-ray images, to reveal bestial instincts behind civilized façades. Finally, there are representations of a giant, all-devouring Mother Earth and horrifying, sexualized female beasts in such Modifications as *Poussin* (1962). Jorn's work ridicules both male and female figures, rendering them monstrous or, in many instances, androgynous. Even when ambiguous, however, the gender implications of Jorn's paintings are often disturbing.

Jorn's writing is punctuated by both undeniably misogynistic outbursts and arguments for more just gender relations. In his texts Jorn consistently advocates for a reversal of conventional, hierarchically ordered values, prioritizing low cul-

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Left: Asger Jorn. Love Battle: Cherchez la femme. *1954. Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg.*
Right: Jorn. Didaska I. *1945. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.*

ture over fine art, irrationality over reason, ambiguity over objective truth, and materiality over spirituality. Thus, as part of his avant-garde position, he defends concerns that have traditionally been associated with femininity.[1] This reversal of value, however, does not necessarily lead to a reversal of the hierarchy of masculine over feminine. On the contrary, Jorn celebrated traditional feminine values only to redefine them as masculine.

Despite Jorn's clear engagement with gender issues, art-historical accounts have deemed it irrelevant to his art, or, more infrequently, considered it in a psychobiographical discourse that sees his works as a direct reflection of his turbulent relationships with various women.[2] Jorn scholar Peter Shield has provided an outline of Jorn's gender-theoretical observations and "deep misogyny," as can be seen in the 1964 text *Alfa og Omega*, for example.[3] Since "the meat of Jorn's argument" lies elsewhere, however, Shield does not include *Alpha and Omega* in his English translation of the reports from the Scandinavian Institute

1. A classic example is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön* (1766)—a book Jorn owned—which associates the feminine with painting, body, imitation, silence, and the natural while the masculine is discursively connected to poetry, mind, expression, and eloquence.
2. Michael Tvermoes, *Jorns Didaska* (Copenhagen: Nyt nordisk forlag Arnold Busck, 1997); Ulla Andersen, *Buttadeo: En biografi om maleren Asger Jorn* (Copenhagen: L & R Fakta, 1998).
3. Asger Jorn, *Alfa og Omega* (1964), report no. 5 from SICV (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1980); and Peter Shield, *Comparative Vandalism: Asger Jorn and the Artistic Attitude to Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Borgen, 1998). While Shield does not relate Jorn's thinking on gender directly to his painting or to gender theory, Karen Kurczynski points out attempts at a theoretical gender thematic in Jorn and Guy Debord's collaborative artist's books. Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941–1961" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2005).



Jorn. The Berserk Are Among Us.
1962. © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

of Comparative Vandalism (SICV).[4] To the contrary, I would argue that the "meat" of this book is closely connected to Jorn's views on art and theory, and that a study of his reflections on gender can expand both the critical understanding and the potential significance of his work.

My aim is not simply to point out Jorn's sexist tendencies, which were typical of his time, but to examine the complex and ambivalent meanings of gender in his output. Treating these themes, Jorn constantly shifts between provocative, inquisitive, and ironic approaches. Drawing on his clash with Elsa Gress in particular, I will sketch the Danish context of his ambiguous positions while showing how his thinking on gender takes form, both as a social critique—in the context of the Situationist International, for example—and as an internal reflection on painting. When Jorn plunges into analyses of gender and feels compelled to assert his masculine position, what are the implications for his artistic project? Does the war between the sexes rage on in his work, or is his work a haven where he explores matters with a more open mind? Is he just another male chauvinist, and, if so, does that compromise the radicality and the significance of his art?

4. See Peter Shield's preface to Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, trans. Peter Shield (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. ix.

Old Wives' Tale or Reactionary Masculinism

As his library attests, Jorn was well versed in gender-related literature. Among others, he read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; the American anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead on gender patterns in aboriginal societies; Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*; Wilhelm Reich's *La revolution sexuelle*; and the Danish politician Elin Høgsbro Appel's theoretical writings on the Parallel Female Policy party, which she founded in 1964.[5] This reading forms the backdrop for Jorn's debate with Elsa Gress.

Gress and Jorn were roughly the same age (born in 1919 and 1914 respectively). In the 1940s they socialized in the same circle of artists and occasionally worked side by side in Gress's apartment. Later they became involved with separate international avant-garde scenes, both addressing the problem of the center/periphery dichotomy in the art scene, geographically and strategically. Jorn identified with a Nordic stance, which he believed to be more inclusive, attacking the hegemonic avant-garde ideology, while Gress founded the international—though remotely located—artist residency "De-center."

With a sharp, polemical style, Gress was one of the country's most notorious debaters, yet she was an outsider to the prevailing intellectual circles, partly because of her gender. She was consistently referred to as an "Amazon," "an unwomanly element in the cultural debate," and "Denmark's only angry young man."[6] She refused to abide by conventional standards for women's appearance, behavior, and family life. Like Jorn, she was well traveled and active in the Danish resistance during World War II. Married to Clifford Wright, a bisexual American painter with whom she had an open relationship, she introduced American perspectives and topics into the otherwise strongly anti-American intellectual debate in Denmark. From a starting point of cultural radicalism[7]—which was not so far from Jorn's—Gress criticized both traditional gender roles and those feminists who wanted merely to reverse things; she battled for gay rights but also scolded homosexuals for their prejudices against straight people. In sum, Gress was every bit as controversial, theoretically well founded, and combative a cultural personality as Jorn. Both represented positions in a debate characteristic of their time. That debate culminated in two books: Gress's *Det Uopdagede Køn* (The Undiscovered Sex) and Jorn's *Alpha and Omega* (published posthumously), which unfolds his ideas about gender relations as a determining factor in cultural production and the creation of meaning.[8]

5. The basic ideas of Appel's little-known Parallel Female Policy party were prohibitions against sex discrimination and strict gender quotas. Thus, the country was to be led by two prime ministers, one male and one female. The party closed down in 1965 for lack of members.

6. See Michael von Cotta-Schønberg and Helga Vang Lauridsen, eds., *Naervaerende: en bog om Else Gress* (Present: A Book about Elsa Gress) (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990).

7. Cultural radicalism (*kulturradikalisme*) is a term in Danish culture describing a group of left-wing, socially responsible individuals with an international outlook, who are often seen as the intellectual elite. The movement was especially strong in the interwar period.

8. I include the following articles in the debate: Kjeld Rask Therkilsen's interview with Gress, "Der er såmaend ikke en, der bare gider kaste en tomat [No One Is Even Going to Bother to Throw a Tomato]," *Berlingske Tidende*, January 26, 1964; Asger Jorn, "Pop og Publicity. Et svar fra Asger Jorn til

In January 1964, Gress claimed in a newspaper interview that the pervasive self-promotion and publicity in modern art rendered it barren, despite its mask of expressive personal styles. She pointed to Pop Art as a parodic extreme of this situation, and called for a more critical art. Gress mentioned Jorn in passing, noting how he used publicity (she had in mind his massive presence in the newspapers) while simultaneously being "afraid of Pop Art."[9] In the same interview she also mentioned her forthcoming book, *The Undiscovered Sex*, which—taking off from Beauvoir, Mead, and others—problematizes patriarchy and advocates for a humanism that does not discriminate between the sexes.

Jorn promptly fired off a rebuttal, "Pop and Publicity: Asger Jorn Replies to an Interview with Elsa Gress), linking the art and gender discussions. While rejecting the use of publicity as marketing, he states that any work of art, in its essence, is publicity, highlighting a book project of his own, which for the occasion he titles "10,000 Years of Nordic Pop Art." Furthermore, Jorn insisted that he was "afraid not of a Pop Art of a democratic kind, by the people and for the people, but of . . . an art for the people yet created by a clever, cynical intellectual-aristocratic elite."[10] Whereas Gress had argued that any personal and expressive style served as publicity for the masculine artist, Jorn insisted that the artist must both use popular culture and "personally vouch for the emotions he awakens in others."[11]

From this point on, both parties increasingly projected gender differences onto their dispute. In a follow-up essay titled "Chivalrous Humanism, Virago Twaddle, and Reactionary Radicalism," Jorn claimed that Gress's seemingly progressive view of art and her humanist notion of gender actually expressed a reactionary quasi-radicalism characteristic of a certain feminine mind-set. Gress retorted that Jorn's claims revealed his own "deeply reactionary and scarcely radical attitude" to the female sex and, moreover, that he represented a pervasive masculine tendency to assume the role of the oppressed.[12] When Gress stated, "We are living in a man's society which defends itself and, as such, is already condemned,"[13] Jorn mistook her statement to be a critique of the male sex as such, not of the failure of patriarchal society:

> We are living in a woman's society where the man is "convicted before the fact." . . . The mistress has become the master. Given that women are

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Elsa Gress [Pop and Publicity: Asger Jorn Replies to an Interview with Elsa Gress]," *Berlingske Tidende*, February 2, 1964; Elsa Gress, "Åbent brev til Asger Jorn [Open Letter to Asger Jorn]," *Berlingske Tidende*, February 5, 1964; Jorn, "Ridderlig humanisme, kaellingesnak og reaktionaer radikalisme [Chivalrous Humanism, Virago Twaddle and Reactionary Radicalism]," unpublished article mailed to the *Information* newspaper in September or October 1964 (Jorn Archives, Silkeborg); Asger Jorn, "Lidt insultorisk børnehavesofistik anno 1964 [Some Insulting Kindergarten Sophistry in the Year 1964], in *Årsberetning fra SISV* (Annual report from SICV) (SICV, 1964); Elsa Gress, "Kvinder—de har jo ingen hjerner [Women—Sure, They Have No Brains]," *Berlingske Tidende*, December 18, 1964; Asger Jorn, "Ukendte verdener [Unknown Worlds]," *Berlingske Tidende*, December 22, 1964; Elsa Gress, *The Undiscovered Sex* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Spectator, 1964), p. 39; and Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*.

9. Gress, quoted in Therkilsen, "No One Is Even Going to Bother to Throw a Tomato . . ."
10. Jorn, "Pop and Publicity," repr. in Gress, *The Undiscovered Sex*, p. 40.
11. Ibid., p. 42.
12. Gress, "Open Letter to Asger Jorn," repr. in *The Undiscovered Sex*, p. 45.
13. Gress, quoted in Therkilsen, "No One Is Even Going to Bother to Throw a Tomato . . . ," p. 5.

> in the majority, this is entirely democratic. One can't explain colors to the color blind, but perhaps we will have to get used to this gray and unnuanced mindset that by now has become pervasive through the intellectual life of the feminocracy, for he who seeks power would rather crush what lies beyond his understanding than admit his limitation. This is the still-unsolved paradox of democracy.[14]

Apart from the fact that for Gress, this was an example of Jorn trying "even harder than usual to misunderstand and, more or less consciously, distort unequivocal statements,"[15] this kind of self-defense, she argued, is precisely what characterizes the crisis in patriarchal society.[16]

The question of whether the understanding of gender should focus on equality, similarity, or difference is central to the debate. While Gress emphasized that gender differences are primarily social constructs, stressing our common human qualities, Jorn saw gender relations as a dialectic of opposites. He believed that equilibrium between the sexes could only emerge after a long period of pressure and resistance, dismissing Gress's desire to go from "systematic oppression to final equilibrium" as utopian.[17]

In *Alpha and Omega*, Jorn attempts, via a mixture of religious, evolutionist, scientific, and mythological accounts, to describe the biological essence of the sexes as well as the dialectical evolution of their relationship through history. Man and woman are each described, by turns, as the "original" sex, which is further conceived as either an unfinished prototype or an inimitable original. The result is a peculiar creation myth of Jorn's making, already introduced, in short form, in *Held og Hasard* (Luck and Chance), written in 1952:

> Much turns out to have evolved quite contrary to our conceptions. If we consider biological evolution, we will see that Eve comes before Adam. In primitive animal forms, the male is just a small appendage to the female, a rib, a cutlet, which she even devours once fertilization has taken place. Looking further on in evolution, we get the impression that the male, who has the smallest genetic significance, is the most superfluous (as is recognized in our hunting laws) and evolves as an aesthetic phenomenon for the entertainment, distraction, and enjoyment of the female, until the male in the higher animals evolved his aggressive and destructive powers and becomes attacker and defender, in short, the avant-garde of the evolution of life. The male, then, by force of his lower real value becomes the outward and superficial power or ruler.

14. Jorn, "Pop and Publicity," p. 40.
15. Gress, "Open Letter to Asger Jorn," p. 43.
16. It is likely that Jorn's attack here is also a reaction to Elin Høgsbro Appel's proposal to reform the democratic system along gender lines. Jorn commented testily in the margins of of his copies of her writings.
17. Jorn, "Chivalrous Humanism," p. 4.

> Therefore, we also see that man's aesthetic or renewing abilities in general are much greater than those of woman, while woman, on the other hand, has greater conservational and harmonizing or ethical capacities than man.[18]

While man is a surplus phenomenon that can put greater energy at his disposal toward creative purposes, woman is essential to reproduction and, hence, biologically determined for stability and conservatism. Her nature, Jorn writes, is to strive for her original state as "all-embracing womb, ur-mother, magna mater, the almighty, the deep-seated archetype of monism."[19] A painting such as *Space Woman* (1953) appears to conjure up an image of the sexes in this ur-mythological form. A giant female beast whose shapeless body rises like a mountain of piled-up flesh takes up most of the picture. At the foot of this female form stands a small, colorful figure recalling Jorn's description of man as a small, aesthetic, and fervently energetic being. Though both the painting and *Alpha and Omega* possess a humorous playfulness, not present in the exchange between Jorn and Gress, they do present the sort of essentialist description of the sexes that Gress criticizes.

In his dispute with Gress, Jorn is pushed into a defensive position where he reveals his most unsparing and sarcastic sides. "When I polemicize a phenomenon to completion and turn away from the polemic to deal with what is essential, it sometimes happens that people actually take offense," Jorn commented. "They think there is a primitive division. One is not allowed to be both positive and negative at the same time, they say. But I don't believe in enthusiastic people who can't get mad."[20] Elsewhere, in fact, he treated gender issues in much more nuanced ways, both theoretically and artistically.



Jorn. Space Woman. *1953.*
Kunsten Museum for
Moderne Kunst, Aalborg.
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

18. Asger Jorn, *Held og Hasard* (Luck and Chance), report no. 3 from SICV (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1963), p. 144.
19. Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 11.
20. Jorn, quoted in Virtus Schade, *Asger Jorn* (Copenhagen: Stig Vendelkaers Forlag, 1968), p. 16.

Women's Society and the Masculinity Crisis

The male identity and its position in modern society was an issue that occupied Jorn long before his debate with Gress. In 1948 he noted that "no person is as anxious and camouflaged as the modern person. . . . That it is particularly the man in modern society who is anxious and tries to hide can hardly be disputed, no matter how you twist and turn it." Therefore, Jorn continued, there is some indication that "what we call the oppression of women is first and foremost the male oppression of his own self."[21]

Masculine Resistance (1953) can be seen as a painterly investigation of this problem. The painting shows a confrontation between a melancholic- looking woman and a bearded male figure. Jutting his jaw, baring his teeth, and rolling his eyes, the man attempts to puff himself up but presents a comical figure instead. The clash between the lofty title and the caricatured figures layers in an ironic distance to an otherwise grave theme and expressive imagery. "Masculine resistance" seems to refer both to the inflated male figure and the aggressive painting style, while the humorous tone appears to deflate both. The frustrated little man radiates aggressive energy and parodic impotence at once. Several works by Jorn show such tragicomic male figures in postures of aggressive self-defense or acts of self-destruction.



Jorn. Masculine Resistance. *1953.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

Jorn was hardly the only artist to register a growing insecurity about masculine identity in the postwar years. Masculine ideals of power and assertiveness had been challenged during the war: on the home front, men had seen their jobs temporarily filled by women, and many came back physically disabled, mentally broken, and passive.[22] After the war, an increasing conformity also took hold.

21. Jorn, *Mahi og Skønne Kunster* (Magic and the Fine Arts) (1948; Copenhagen: Borgen, 1971), p. 77.
22. On masculinity in modernist art, see Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Rune Gade, ed., *Masculinities: Art, and Gender* (Copenhagen: Informations forlag, 2001); Anna Lindberg, *The Masculine Mystique: Art, Gender, and Modernity* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2002).

The decline in personal liberty and the expansion of consumer culture put male identity under additional pressure. Further, the Kinsey Reports on human sexuality were a cause of consternation, with their statistics about men's fast-declining virility and the pervasiveness of homosexuality.[23] Denmark's new constitution of 1953 allowed for female succession to the monarchy. And over the course of the 1950s a "masculinity crisis" became mainstream news in the media.[24]

A need thus arose to defend masculinity and formulate a new male identity, and Jorn's work can be seen as a response. As Marcia Brennan has noted, "When social pressures on men to conform threatened cherished notions of masculine vitality, freedom, and authenticity, modernist paintings came to be seen as metaphorical embodiments of both idealized and highly conflicted conceptions of masculine selfhood."[25] This duality of masculine power and vulnerability is continually negotiated in Jorn's painting and writing.

In 1947 Jorn wrote the article "Yang-Yin: The Dialectic-Materialist Principle of Life." Discussing the changing representation of the sexes in art and the values attributed to them, he describes gender as a fundamental dialectical relation—the original difference on which all other relations of difference are built. He argues that the crisis in Western capitalist society is caused in part by a fatal misunderstanding, in art and philosophy, of the "true dialectical relation between the sexes." Since Aristotle, there has been a tradition of linking the square to the masculine principle and the circle to the feminine.[26] Jorn accepts the opposition as such but asks, "What is the masculine and what is the feminine of these two things? If we are mistaken about this question, it will be fatal, because we will then perceive the feminine as masculine and the masculine as feminine. Such an inversion would have the most peculiar consequences."[27] Attempting to resolve the "proper" state of affairs, he defines masculinity as an active, productive, giving, light, assertive, and dynamic principle, represented by the *circle*, and femininity as a passive, consuming, receiving, nocturnal, static, and conserving principle repre-

23. Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell R. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders Co., 1953). The reports caused an uproar in the Danish press. See Knut Jokker, "Den amerikanske Adam [The American Adam]," *Social-Demokraten*, April 20, 1948; Gunnar Leistikow, "Sex og Moral i Amerika [Sex and morality in America]," *Politiken*, May 2, 1948; Sven Møller Kristensen, *Land og Folk*, June 6, 1948; and Trygve Braatoy, "Seksualitet og Sannhet" [Sexuality and truth], *Information*, July 5–6, 1948.

24. See Margaret Mead, "American Man in a Woman's World," *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 1957; Robert J. Moskin, "The American Male: Why Do Women Dominate Him?," *Look* 22, no. 3 (February 4, 1958), pp. 95–104; and Arthur Schlesinger, "The Crisis of American Masculinity," *Esquire* (November 1968), pp. 63–65.

25. Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects*, p. 10.

26. Aristotle defined form and unity, as well as the active, the effective, the straight, and the square as masculine; and matter and plurality, as well as the passive, the receptive, and the curve as feminine. See David Summers, "Form and Gender," *New Literary History* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 243–71.

27. Asger Jorn, "Yang-Yin. Det dialektisk-materialistiske livsprincip [Yang-Yin: The Dialectic-Materialist Principle of Life]," *A5 Meningsblad for unge arkitekter* (1947), pp. 19–34.

sented by the *square*. His attribution of properties and values to the sexes thus follows the traditional formula, though he swaps their symbolic shapes.

Jorn finds this battle over the proper symbolic coding of gender also expressed in class struggle, where the active, producing, and thus "masculine" working class has a feminine symbolism thrust upon it by the passive, destructive, and "feminine" upper class, which in turn takes on the masculine symbolism. It is a struggle for the phallus and the right to a masculine predicate. Jorn concludes that no symbol is absolutely feminine or masculine, but that it is part of a dialectical yin-yang principle. The sexes, then, appear encapsulated in one another, a yielding feminine gentleness containing a kernel of masculine strength, and vice versa.

> Western Europe has turned its culture into a "masculine cliff," which demonstrates its "maleness" by standing firm against the futile onslaught of nature's seas and winds. The heroic image of the "male rock" standing undaunted in the broiling seas is thrown out before us whenever there is talk of great-minded individuals or our culture as a whole. And when we find that the sea in its futile struggle against this "heroic icon" has actually eroded the whole base of the cliff, this is replaced by stuck-on feet of clay, a stone colossus that will and must come tumbling down no matter how much effort is spent in patching holes and making repairs. Since the days of Babylon, our culture has been a woman in shining tin armor, a Joan of Arc figure, and today is just a gray tin-can culture with a gaudy label and disgusting and tasteless content. This is what man has become, and our woman is flowing feather boas and soft lace with stainless steel hearts.[28]

For Jorn, then, Western society is not a patriarchy but a fundamentally feminine system that simply appears masculine. By looking only at the surface, Western culture misjudges its own identity, with the result that both femininity and masculinity are debased. The erroneous gender attribution results in a vulgarization of both sexes and a trivializing of culture.

In this text and several others from the same period Jorn sets out such paired opposites as yin and yang, static and dynamic, rationality and spontaneity. Subsequently, however, he declares such oppositions to be ill-conceived, since they entail "everyone fighting against everyone and everything's isolation and monumentality."[29] Instead, Jorn proposes his own Taoist-inspired "dialectic of life," the logic of which operates through "the *union* of the masculine and the feminine and not by always setting these two principles up in tensions of contrast or counterpoint."[30] The goal is a supple, dynamic relationship where the masculine and the feminine resist yet complement each other without congealing in fixed opposition.

Jorn's logic, however, prioritizes the masculine "yang" principle, since in itself

28. Ibid., p. 27.
29. Asger Jorn, "Apollon eller Dionysos [Apollo or Dionysus]," *Byggmästaren* (1947), p. 256.
30. Jorn, "Yang-Yin," p. 22.

it represents positive dynamism, while femininity is negatively defined. These basic definitions of masculinity as the One and femininity as the Other, the negation of masculinity, are what Beauvoir criticized in *The Second Sex* in 1949, and what Gress, too, questioned in *The Undiscovered Sex*. When the subject is presumed to be male, the universal concept of humanity is formulated as masculine. Both Beauvoir and Gress argue to include woman in the definition of any universal subject and think that everyone should be conceived as human before being defined in terms of gender—Gress terms this "the humanization of both sexes."[31] Jorn, on the other hand, considers gender differences to be constitutive of humanity.[32]

While Jorn wants to overturn the rigid stagnation of sexual opposition, he uses the notion of the encapsulation of the sexes in one another to (re)define the negative values in society as feminine. In "Yang-Yin," for example, he describes how "the Nazi movement, however masculine and muscular its façade may have been, represented a decidedly feminine and homosexual mentality."[33] Likewise, he describes classical art as a femininity disguised as masculinity, and driven by "the task of eradicating any natural view of manly and womanly in artists' thinking, preparing them for the strong-willed and unbending or, more accurately, feminine or homosexual form of masculinity and, above all, preventing fertilization, the dialectic of life, artistic fertilization."[34]

Homosexuality for Jorn represents the classical tradition's corruption of "natural" gender relation. It is precisely this naturalization of the heterosexual structure that Judith Butler later criticizes. According to Butler, opposing the male and female sex secures an obligatory heterosexuality.[35] Regardless of Jorn's point that one sex can appear as the other, he ends up confirming heterosexual normativity and the related system of gender "naturalness." Hence, his political critique of capitalist society also becomes a defense of a patriarchal, heteronormative power structure. Gress realized this, and critiqued both Jorn's negative definition of homosexuality and his patriarchal mind-set.[36]

According to Jorn, modern society is threatened by increasing homosexualization or feminization and the elevation of values like harmony and consensus. He believes the growing conservatism, consumer culture, and inertia of industrial society to be the cause of this and fears that they will render superfluous such masculine virtues as physical activity, progress, and artistic exploration.[37] Jorn thereby inscribes himself into a modernist tradition, as described by Andreas Huyssen, of

31. On several points, however, Gress is critical of Beauvoir, arguing that she stereotypes the sexes and neglects men's problems (Gress, *The Undiscovered Sex*, p. 132).

32. A focus on gender difference as such is not necessarily problematic from a feminist perspective, but Luce Irigaray and others have pointed out that the *asymmetry* of this dialectic is itself expressive of a masculine "signifying economy" and that both sexes should have a positive definition. See Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. Karin Montin (New York: Routledge, 1994).

33. Jorn, "Yang-Yin," p. 21.

34. Ibid., p. 22.

35. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

36. Gress, *The Undiscovered Sex*, pp. 98–104.

37. Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 29

defining mass culture as feminine. The endeavor to separate kitsch from high art, which was regarded as masculine territory, entails a gender hierarchization, and the avant-garde, though overturning such puritanism, hardly challenges this underlying gender coding. As Huyssen argues,

> the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the "wrong" kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist. . . . The problem is not the desire to differentiate between forms of high art and depraved forms of mass culture and its co-options. The problem is rather the persistent gendering as feminine of that which is devalued.[38]

In his 1941 article "Intimate Banalities," Jorn had celebrated popular, hackneyed expressions as representing the deepest inspiration in art.[39] Still, he primarily emphasized the premodern folk tradition, including sailors' tattoos and tacky rhymes in craftsmen's slogans, for, as Huyssen points out, characteristically "working-class culture or residual forms of older popular or folk cultures" generally avoid feminine coding.[40] Attacking the divide of high and mass culture itself from a populist standpoint, Jorn struggles to tackle the problems of gender attribution described in Huyssen's broad generalization. When, in his polemic with Gress, Jorn protests against being linked with publicity as a form of commercialization but readily admits to publicity as "folk culture" with its associated politically revolutionary ramifications, he is establishing a masculine identity. His embrace of such feminine-coded elements as kitsch, banality, and popular culture, then, seemingly produces a need to also accentuate every masculine association in the fear of being devoured by a feminized mass culture.

Situationist Desire

Jorn was active in the Situationist International from 1957 to 1961. In its desire to revolutionize society through the banality of everyday life, the movement would seem to be an ideal forum for thinking through the gender attribution of mass culture. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre, whose 1947 *Critique of Everyday Life* was the basis of much Situationist thinking, linked everyday life to women and images of women in women's magazines and elsewhere. In celebrating everyday life, however, Situationist theory associates femininity not with the revolutionizing forces of everyday life but with its negative aspects, including the alienation wrought by mass society. Lefebvre points out how, on the one hand, many images of women are "violently attractive,"

38. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 53.
39. Jorn, "Intime banaliteter," *Helhesten: Tidsskrift for kunst* 1, no. 2 (1941), pp. 33–38; translated into English by René Lauritsen in *Hvad Skovsøen Gemte: Jorn's Modifications and Kirkeby's Overpaintings*, ed. Teresa Østergaard Pedersen (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2011), pp. 129–31.
40. Huyssen, p. 49.

while, on the other, they create a mechanical eroticism lacking "genuine sensuality."[41] Such images produce a desire for an impersonal, staged, and unachievable object, an alienated desire that cannot be redeemed. Images of women thus occupy a particularly problematic position in Situationist productions.[42]

A case in point is *Fin de Copenhague* (1957), a collaborative book by Jorn and Guy Debord. The book's collages of images and texts from newspapers and magazines are combined with splashes of colored lithographic ink suggestive of expressive painting. Much of the imagery comes from advertisements situating women and lifestyle products as objects of desire. Torn out of context, the images seem unmotivated—parodies of advertising—while the general rhetoric of consumer society is laid bare in cut-out sentences such as "What do *you* want? Better and cheaper food? Lots of new clothes? . . . Whatever you want, it's coming your way—plus greater leisure for enjoying it all . . . *et voilà votre vie transformée!*"[43] Elsewhere, the distance between the sexes is remarked upon in statements lamenting how boys and girls can no longer play together as true friends.[44] On the final page of the book, Jorn and Debord place a parodic ad:

> Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Tell us in no more than 250 words why your girl is the sweetest girl in town. State in your letter her name, occupation and age (remember she must be single, and from sixteen to nineteen, inclusive), and pop a recent picture of her in the envelope. And please write her name and address clearly on the back of the picture as well.[45]

Jorn and Debord satirize women's role as objects of desire that can be traded between men, but they fail to clarify whether they are laughing *with* or *at* the male-chauvinist attitude. Likewise, the book reproduces existing images of women, even as it provides a critical and humorous *détournement* of them. In "The Sex of the Situationist International," Kelly Baum argues that the corresponding use, in the magazine *Internationale Situationniste*, of images of women as an apparently uncritical device should be viewed as a visual critique of the pictorialization and alienation of the erotic. However, as she also points out, it is hard to tell who exactly the SI is "blaming for the alienation of desire: "capitalism, women, or both?"[46]

This question is particularly relevant considering the male-dominated culture of the Situationist movement. As Ralph Rumney, a former member of the SI,

41. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), p. 98. For a discussion of Lefebvre's and the Situationists' critique of the alienation of eroticism, see Kelly Baum, "The Sex of the Situationist International," *October* 126 (Fall 2008), pp. 23–43.

42. Jorn expresses a similar ambiguity about images of women in his discussion with Gress. On one hand, he calls for an analysis of why "modern society needs to make such a huge cult of the female human beast, the pin-up," while, on the other, he does not wish to replace this image of women with "the intellectual courtesan à la Pompadour de Beauvoir" (Jorn, "Chivalrous Humanism," p. 6).

43. Asger Jorn and Guy Debord, *Fin de Copenhague* (Copenhagen: Permild and Rosengreen, 1957), n.p.

44. "Il y a quelque temps, nous jouions, avec les garçons, en vrais camarades. Maintenant, que nous avons tous environ quatorze ans, nous ne pouvons plus jouer." Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Baum, "The Sex of the Situationist International," p. 39.

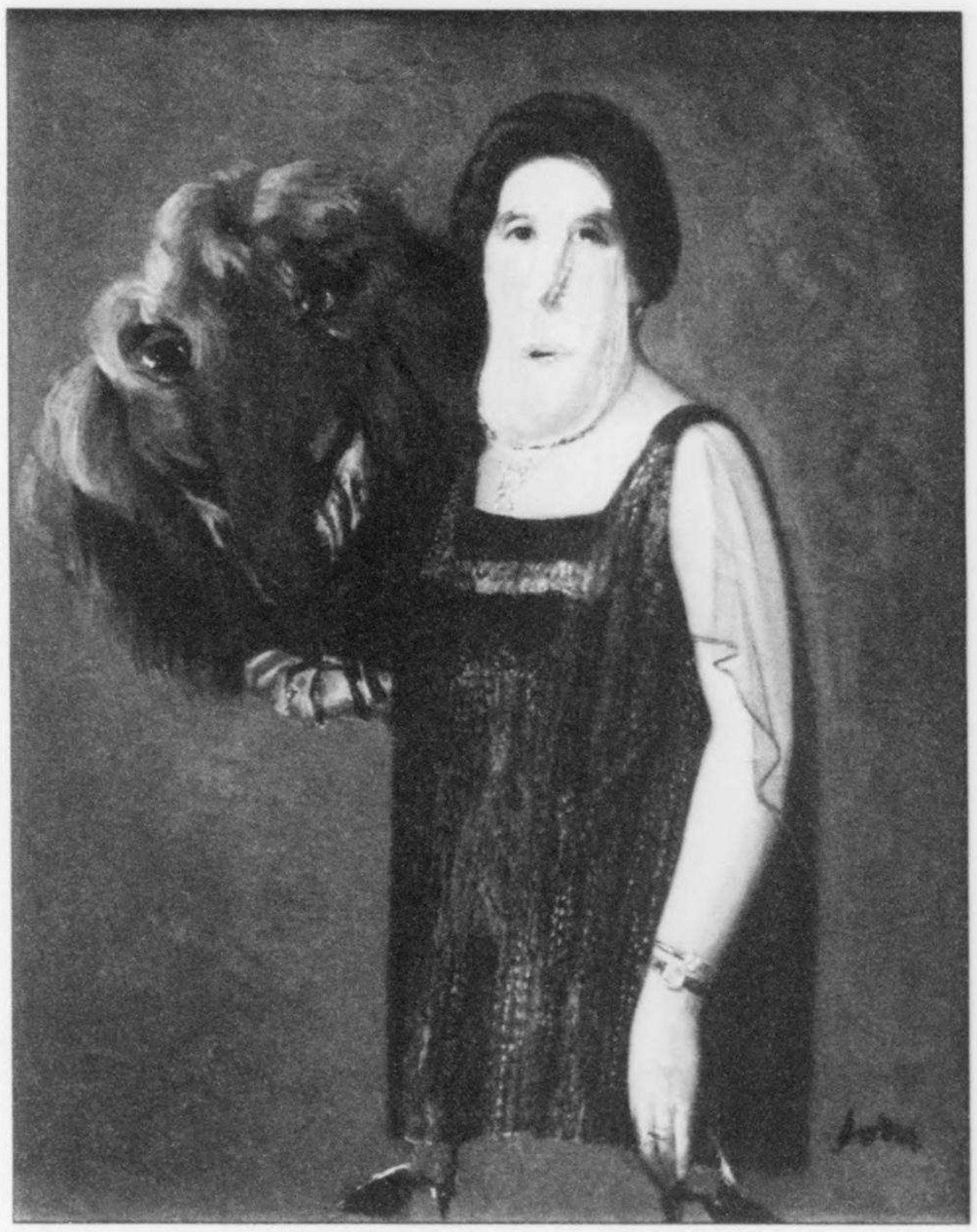
has stated, "One of the curious things about the SI was that it was extraordinarily antifeminist in its practice. Women were there to type, cook supper, and so on."[47] Nonetheless, neither Michèle Bernstein, Debord's wife, nor Jacqueline de Jong, who was in a relationship with Jorn during this period, was willing to settle for these roles. Their great contributions to the group, however, were not publicized by its father figures. Rumney argues that part of the political theory presented by Debord as his own should be attributed to Bernstein, while de Jong, for her part, has claimed that, upon being asked to head the Dutch branch of the SI, "the only vote against me came from Jorn! He wanted me for himself."[48] It seems thus reasonable to believe that Jorn and Debord's critical strategy in *Fin de Copenhague*, in terms of gender, was focused as much on critiquing the alienation of male desire as on revolutionizing existing gender roles.

While in its lived practice the SI hardly revolutionized the role of women, Jorn did carry out a tangible détournement of images of women in his 1962 series of Disfigurations. Attacking and modifying old portrait paintings of women, Jorn transformed their inviting expressions and elegant poses into comical and disturbing creatures.[49] Paint-drooling monsters assault naked nymphs on the forest floor, and sensual señoritas with come-hither eyes are engulfed by teeth ready to snap at anyone who comes near. The overall title for this body of work was *La belle et la bête humaine*, the ambiguity of which is reflected in the visualization of beautiful women being assaulted by male animals even as their own animal sides emerge, transforming them into human beasts.

The critical potential of these disfigurations is manifold. In part, Jorn was taking aim at vain bourgeois ladies in feather boas, unmasking them to expose the primitive, creaturely side of their nature, repressed by bourgeois culture and now threatening to turn against them. The disfigurations also attack the conservative political and artistic conventions that originally constructed such images of women. Finally, the brutal beasts throwing themselves on the women point to the fact that the paintings were highly sexualized to begin with: the animals almost come to materialize the possessive gaze of the viewer, thus perhaps commenting on the gendered nature of looking.

Unlike the entrenched rhetoric that marked his debate with Gress, Jorn's artistic treatment of gender issues leaves room for irony, doubt, and ambiguity, buoying his belief that theoretical discussions on gender were a somewhat trivial foundation when compared to a more imaginative artistic approach. In *Alpha and Omega* he states that in his description of gender he is simply referring to existing mythologies and reproducing them "without a shred of sympathy," since only by knowing exactly

47. Stewart Home, "The Self-Mythologisation of the Situationist International," in *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: Nebula, in association with Automedia, 2011), p. 213.
48. Jens Erik Sørensen, ed., *Jorn International* (Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Museum of Modern Art, 2011), p. 226.
49. Jorn modifies male portraits in a similar way, but because the original paintings of women already have a powerful erotic undercurrent, Jorn's intervention is more obviously gender-specific.



Jorn. La Dolce Vita II. *1964.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

where we stand in terms of gender will we be able to move on. This "ruthless recognition and nothing else," he continues, "has been the goal of my literary activity. All this is inartistic. Why not stick to art, people ask me, but I have never let go of it. Without it, I would not be able to rise above these dreary perspectives. Without art, others wouldn't be able to move on, either."[50] While his claim of impartiality is hard to accept, his confidence in art as a place to negotiate gender relations in a less confrontational way seems to be sincere. *Fin de Copenhague* and the Modifications can be seen as attempts at humorous and ambiguous gender expressions resulting from such an open and inquisitive attitude.

Masculine Spontaneity and Self-Restraint in Painterly Discourse

Even while employing the *détournement* technique, Jorn held onto his mode of expressive painting. This caused a rift in the SI, which largely employed a distinction between art, which they considered intellectual and critical, and painting, which they regarded as naïve and commercial (and therefore "feminine").[51] Nonetheless, Jorn

50. Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 36.
51. The SI consequently split into a pro-painting Scandinavian fraction and a section that was critical of painting, led by Debord.

insisted on working within both a male-coded discourse critical of painting and a context of expressionist painting that was typically identified as masculine. His painting framed a negotiation between different approaches to the medium, and between its feminine and masculine connotations.

Throughout his career, the Danish public associated Jorn almost exclusively with the painterly, expressive side of his work; his Situationist involvement remained more or less unnoticed. As Gress pointed out, Jorn's public persona, whether he wanted it to or not, confirmed the image of the artist as a genius bursting with masculine vitality and agency. This artist's role expressed the last gasp of masculine culture, as she saw it, noting Jackson Pollock as an example of a male artist self-destructively living his own myth.[52] Just as people identified with a sense of wildness, freedom, and sensitivity in Pollock's work, Jorn satisfied a similar need in Danish society for authenticity and risk-taking. Typically for Gress, who was oriented towards the U.S., she held Jorn up against not a European but an American painter, one of the first to be discussed from a gender perspective.

Much European art criticism similarly saw Jorn in terms of the myth of the sensitive, ingenious, alcoholic male painter. In 1960, for example, the poet Jacques Prévert saw "a touch of drunken genius dancing in gin"[53] in Jorn's painting, and in 1961 the French art critic Michel Ragon described his work as

> choleric painting, besmeared painting thrown at the spectator's face, kneaded painting, messed-up painting, raging and free, oh how free, so free that it sometimes seems to be thrown on the canvas in a go-to-hell fashion, which no doubt it is, but Jorn does not care, for he urinates his paintings, he . . . it (but let us be decent, we are writing in a nice art review. Well all right, let us go on). Jorn is full of ideas. They split his head. He is full of visions. His eyes are drunken.[54]

Such descriptions situate Jorn in the discourse of the expressive gesture signifying authentic, free, and intense masculine presence. Pollock's drip paintings were comparably likened to territorial pissing and the act of fertilization, and, as has often been pointed out, the energy expended on representing Pollock as a masculine hero, instead of emphasizing the feminine associations of his painting, is symptomatic of a general postwar demasculinization.[55] Though the material aspect of Pollock's painting was at times associated with femininity and bodily matter, this discourse seems to have been subdued.

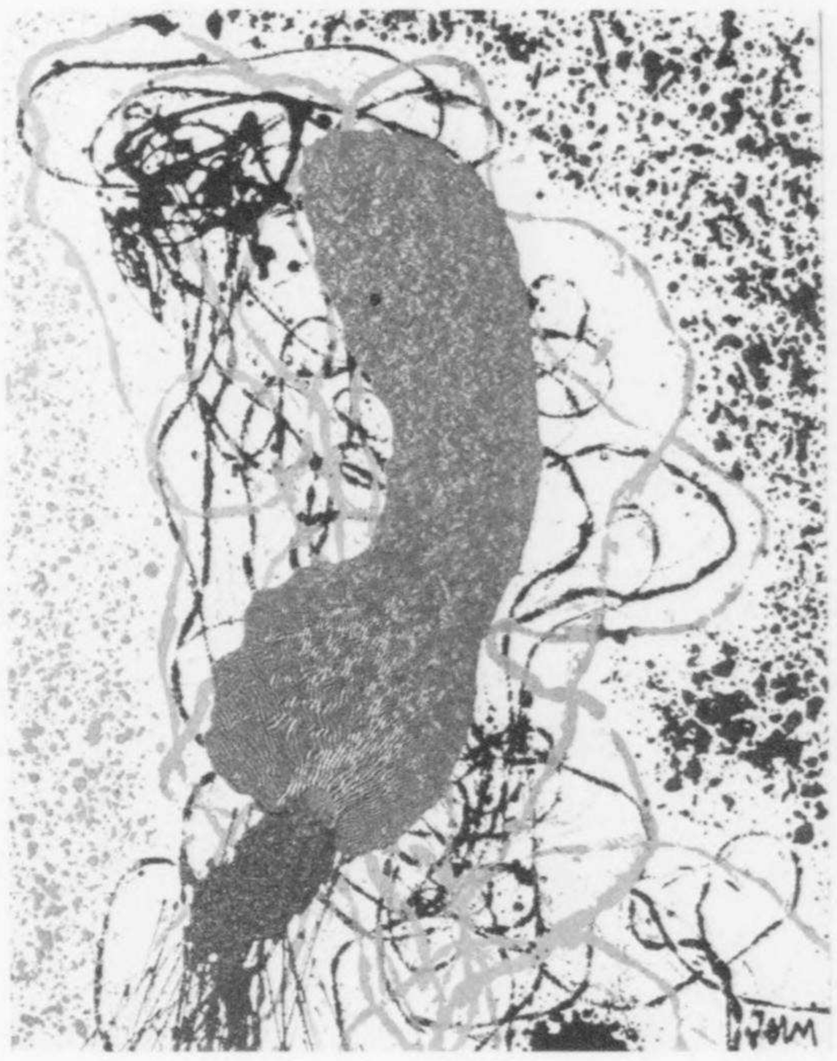
52. Gress, *The Undiscovered Sex*, p. 24.

53. Jacques Prévert, Yvon Taillandier, and René Bertelé, *Asger Jorn* (Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche, 1960).

54. Michel Ragon, "Asger Jorn," *Cimaise art et architecture actuels* 8, no. 51 (1961), p. 56.

55. For a discussion of the gendered reception of Pollock, see Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 31–43; and Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects*. Brennan in particular points out the ambivalent gender codes in the contemporary discourse on Pollock's painting.

Ragon's description of Jorn's drunken gestures and paint spewing like bodily fluids brings to mind paintings such as *Dead Drunk Danes* (1960) and *Allmen* (1961). One of the artist's so called Luxury Paintings, *Allmen* is dominated by a large, orange phallic shape that, alongside a number of threadlike color tracks and fecal brown stains, comes to resemble a vulgar caricature of expressive discharge. As Karen Kurczynski has pointed out, the title can function as a humorous reduction of "all men" to the male sex organ and an evocation of the Danish word *almen* (common), perhaps referring to (male) sexuality as a common human instinct.[56] The painting seems to deliberately play on the discourse of virile, masculine force, balancing a "genuine," spontaneous expression against an ironic attitude. It appears as a humorous comment on the spontaneous technique as leading almost automatically to a base, banal, erotic expression of masculinity.



Jorn. Allmen. *1961.*
© Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

Another description of Jorn's aggressive painterly assault on the canvas also ascribes erotic undertones to the gestural. Jacqueline de Jong relates how Jorn tried to seduce her at their first meeting: when she rejected him he grabbed one of his paintings off the wall in frustration and "modified it," to her horror and amusement, "by splashing a tin of black bicycle lacquer onto it."[57] Such a description of Jorn's violation of the canvas as a near-Freudian sublimation of libido does not ostensibly conflict with the Situationist view of his method as a conceptual critique of painting. Where Jorn's painting is concerned, there always seems to be both a vitalistic, expressive discourse at work and an ironic distortion of that same discourse.

Jorn himself discusses the ambiguous sexual implications of spontaneous painting in *Alpha and Omega.* He starts with what he calls the classical concept of art, which (as described in his "Yang-Yin" article) defines its own disciplined, controlled style as masculine and equates expressive, spontaneous painting with

56. Karen Kurczynski, "Ironic Gestures: Asger Jorn, Informel, and Abstract Expressionism," in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, ed. Joan Marter (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University, 2007), pp. 122–24.
57. Jacqueline de Jong, "Asger Jorn and Our Relationship 1958–1971," in *Jorn International*, p. 224.

either frenetic, uncontrollable "honesty" or pretentious effect—both coded as feminine.[58] However, according to Jorn, the spontaneous-expressive style is neither a direct function of the artist's own affect nor a calculating intention to create affect. It is suspended between erotic instinct and self-restraint, and it is between these two opposing forces that the painting's gender identity is formed.

Jorn here builds on the opposition, favored by both Sigmund Freud and Herbert Marcuse, of Eros and civilization as fundamental human drives.[59] Proposing that civilization began when man started controlling his impulsive, erotic urges, Freud employs the image of the primal man who controls his instinctive desire to put out a fire by urinating on it, and instead starts tending to the fire (for example, the rhetoric about Jorn's and Pollock's drip paintings as impulsive, urinary acts). While Freud deemed self-restraint and control of Eros essential, Marcuse contended that this repression of instinct becomes a way for the rulers to control the people, and that Eros is a liberating force for humanity.

Extending these opposing valuations of Eros and control, Jorn describes two hierarchies of masculinity. The classical tradition puts self-control at the top, as the manliest, and the erotic instinct as a feminine masculinity at the bottom. As Jorn sees it, this elevation of self-restraint leads to a denial of man's primary nature. Man can consequently only express his secondary, feminine nature, and art, he argues, takes on a stagnant, feminized or "homosexual" expression. Spontaneous art—which Jorn associates with the Nordic—conversely puts Eros at the top of the male hierarchy, focusing on the positive, liberating expression of masculinity in dynamic energy, renewal, and vitality. Thus, in principle, any kind of gender identity can be attributed to spontaneous painting. Well aware of the irony in this, Jorn notes that "the Nordic view of art brands traditional Latin art as feminine and vice versa. The situation is only ludicrous."[60] Even so Jorn has no intention of altering the fact that both sides consider heterosexual masculinity to be the supreme label, arguing that the Nordic highlighting of Eros in masculinity makes room for the feminine aspects. Since, Jorn explains, we "are proponents of the organic and the natural, we prefer the genuinely feminine in art rather than the so-called homosexual. This tendency to seek the genuinely feminine as an artistic measure of value is an attempt to come to terms with the classical concept of art without taking up its consequences."[61] Regarding painting as an expression of a "natural" balance between the feminine and the masculine, Jorn can enfold feminine features in spontaneous painting without defining it as feminine in a general sense. Despite this so-called balance, however, art is still described by Jorn as a construction of

58. Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*, pp. 167–73. Jorn uses Italian critic and philosopher Benedetto Croce as representative of the classical art view.

59. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961); and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1955).

60. Jorn, *Alpha and Omega*, p. 171.

61. Ibid., p. 173.

masculinity. From a comparative reading of Jorn's texts, as Peter Shield has shown, a basic definition can be derived of Art (notably spontaneous and experimental art) as masculine, Style (or style-focused classical and modernist art) as homosexual, and Fashion as feminine.[62]

How Matter Comes to Matter

Jorn's painting comprises not only spontaneous gesture but also abundant texture and materiality. Two series, in particular, Frivolous Pictures (1955) and Luxury Paintings (1961), boast an excess of raw, sticky matter: paint is poured, dripped and flung at the canvas or mixed with asphalt dust, sand, silver granulate, and other materials. From the backdrop of these painterly explorations of matter, Jorn, in his books *Luck and Chance* (1952) and *The Natural Order* (1964) and elsewhere, devises a theoretical concept of materiality that describes how matter itself actively helps to shape meaning. In a very general sense, he attempts to rethink the relationship between matter and consciousness. Jorn does not remark upon the possible gender implications of this theory, though elsewhere he often puts forward the traditional opposition between nature, the body, and the object as feminine and culture, consciousness, and the subject as masculine. In this context, however, he does not connect the material, sensual aspect of painting, or matter in general, with the feminine, but rather takes a dialectical-materialist perspective, giving primacy to matter before thought. As both Mira Schor and Jane Blocker have noted, when the wet, greasy, sticky, messy, material aspects of painting did gradually acquire such a feminine coding in the 1960s, it was especially in connection with Conceptual Art's devaluation of painting in general and Abstract Expressionism in particular.[63] Jorn, defensive regarding the critical potential, the materiality, and the masculine coding of painting, did not contribute directly to this discourse.

The identification of matter with femininity is a problematic that feminism has addressed in various ways. Broadly speaking, critics *either* redefine matter and bodiliness as positive, and in turn undermine the identification of woman with matter,[64] *or*, conversely, distance the feminine from bodily matter and instead emphasize cultural constructs.[65] According to Karen Barad, a feminist theorist of cultural studies and a theoretical physicist, feminist theory has too long ignored the reality of matter and the body. Today, Barad states, "Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only

62. Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, p. 195.

63. Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota); and Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University, 1997).

64. I have in mind the reclaimation of the female body in the work of Carolee Schneemann, Mira Schor, Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, and Valie Export; Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject; and Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, and Hélène Cixous, who undermine phallocentric essentializations by scrutinizing the concepts of women, body, and matter within science and philosophy.

65. This is the case with social-constructivist feminism, from Simone de Beauvoir to Judith Butler.

thing that doesn't seem to matter anymore is matter."[66] Because of this reluctance to deal with matter, she states, its definition has to some extent remained stuck in patriarchal formulations.

Consequently Barad has engaged in a new understanding of matter in an effort to formulate a "feminist notion of realism." Her theory sets out to transcend the traditional opposition of subject and object, consciousness and body, discourse and matter, rethinking the boundaries between them as something both objectively existing and discursively constructed. Like Jorn, she considers matter to be an active agent and, also like Jorn, she bases her theory of matter on Niels Bohr's quantum physics. Accordingly, Barad's theory presents a suitable framework for discussing the gender aspects of Jorn's concept of matter, while in some ways, it seems, Jorn's theories can be extended directly into Barad's contemporary feminist discourse.

In *Luck and Chance*, Jorn critiques the classical opposition between a passive, lifeless object and a conscious, feeling, and acting subject, defining

> the concept of the subject as a designation for any exclusive or limited sphere of interest in matter, any system of action, any individuality. But the limited phenomenon in matter is what is called the object. Object and subject should thus only be two different ways of perceiving the same phenomena and two different sides of their essence. Quite so![67]

To Jorn, subject and object do not express an essential opposition of matter and spirit but are simply two different viewpoints that describe various aspects of the properties of matter. The human body is sentient matter that has its own interests and a "body-forming principle" that is contiguous with other phenomena, objects, and spheres of interest.[68] The artistic attitude, Jorn asserts, is a special subjective interest in matter's own interest and creation of form, a study in "matter's futile power of superfluity or luxury" and the "excess or irrational effects in context."[69]

Niels Bohr approaches this interest in the irrational effects of matter from a different angle in his quantum theory, observing that such a phenomenon as light can behave both as waves and particles depending on how we observe it. Phenomena and matter both objectively exist and are constructed by us. Jorn claims to have experienced in painting a co-existence of not only two but three equally valid but mutually opposing truths about matter complementing each other.[70] As mentioned, he does not himself relate his concept of matter as both active creator and construct of discourse directly to a gender perspective.

66. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003), p. 802.
67. Jorn, *Held og Hasard*; trans. in Shield, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, pp. 242–44.
68. Ibid., p. 244.
69. Ibid., p. 265.
70. Jorn, *Naturens Orden*; trans. in Shield, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, p. 32. Bohr concluded that two conflicting truths about a phenomenon can co-exist and complement each other. Inspired by Bohr's theory of complementarity, Jorn develops his own "triolectical" theory, which generally expands thinking in binary oppositions into thinking in three positions that are mutually inconsistent but recognize each other as complementary truths. For an elaboration of Jorn's triolectical theory and its relation to dialectical materialism, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, pp. 27–61.

Karen Barad does make this connection, defining her overlapping discursive-material approach as a feminist materialism. Similar to Jorn, she considers matter to be "not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency."[71] Moving the discussion of matter into the area of the body and gender, she argues that the sex of the body is partly constructed through performative repetitions of existing discourses about gender (as described by Judith Butler), and partly the body's matter is performative and active in itself; it offers resistance and kicks back.

Like Jorn, Barad employs Bohr's theory of complementarity to describe how body and consciousness, matter and discourse, and object and subject are not fully formed phenomena that interact with one another but phenomena that mutually transform and constitute one another. The boundary between them is locally established in each individual situation. While Jorn ties this view of matter to an artistic position, for Barad it is a specific feminist strategy, one that denotes a way of thinking in which matter—including the matters of gender and body—can be conceived neither as external to culture nor as culturally determined. If one looks beyond Jorn's gender-theoretical statements and views his concept of matter through Barad's theory, it seems to be consistent with a feminist effort to define the classic paired opposites as something that does not exist in a fixed form but is constantly coming into being. Not considering gender differences, Jorn here takes his thinking in complementarity rather than dialectical oppositions much further than in his Yang-Yin text, for instance. Barad's theory can indicate a way by which we could develop some of the unrealized potentials that exist in Jorn's thinking—potentials for a flexible, dynamic relation between the sexes that recognizes material—discursively constructed differences not as fixed dichotomies but as boundary demarcations that are always being formed in different ways depending on the specific situation.

Conclusion

Jorn engaged on an increasing number of fronts, from the philosophical to the political, ethical, gender-theoretical, and aesthetic, drawing everything into a total investigation of what it means to be human in his time. The general shape of his theory was initially based on dialectical thinking, including classic gender oppositions. Over the course of his career he treated and rejected various dialectical oppositions and moved toward increasingly complex constructs of complementarity, while at the same time his painterly vocabulary became increasingly more fluid and unbound. He strove to straddle several complementary positions simultaneously: expressive painting and critical *détournement*; intimate painterly banalities and political social engagement; a deep grounding in Nordic folk tradition and a revolutionary avant-garde position. The question of gender, however, was persistently problematic for him, and rather than increasing the

71. Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," p. 827.

complexity and inclusiveness of his gender conception, he retained it as an outer limit for his comprehensiveness. His gender conception seems to have influenced his theory in the direction of asymmetrical opposition rather than complementary thinking. His gendering of seemingly equal notions in this way often reveals his true sympathies and a more biased stance.

When he claims to strive for a natural dialectic between the sexes, as in his 1947 article "Yang-Yin," he props his argument on a hetero-normative representation of gender, prioritizing the male position. In *Luck and Chance* and *Alpha and Omega*, and by force of his painterly production and Situationist engagement, he outlines an aesthetic of a vulnerable and aggressive masculinity that veers from vitalistic tendencies to an ironic critique of that expression. Jorn's polemic with Elsa Gress makes it clear that his need to defend a masculine position becomes increasingly desperate as the women's liberation movement and feminism gain visibility in the public consciousness, directly challenging him on the issue of gender. Perhaps this defensive position can serve as a sign of how important the women's liberation movement really was in Denmark at this time. While Jorn acknowledged the fact that masculinity was threatened, he also recognized the folly of art movements' trying to mutually feminize each other. The debate with Gress prodded his growing awareness of the gender ideology in his own practice, though in his artworks he treated gender more openly and humorously.

According to Jorn, the aesthetic act is a plunge into the unknown, and he links this willingness to take risks to masculinity. In his confrontation with feminism, however, he seems hesitant about plunging into the "Unknown Worlds" of female thinking.[72] The fact that he begins to see the need to do so both socially and artistically is, however, a step in the direction of acknowledging these worlds as truly complementary. Theories such as Karen Barad's may suggest a way to extend the potential of Jorn's own flexible, dynamic thinking to include gender.

72. Asger Jorn, "Ukendte verdener" [Unknown worlds], *Berlingske Tidende*, December 22, 1964.

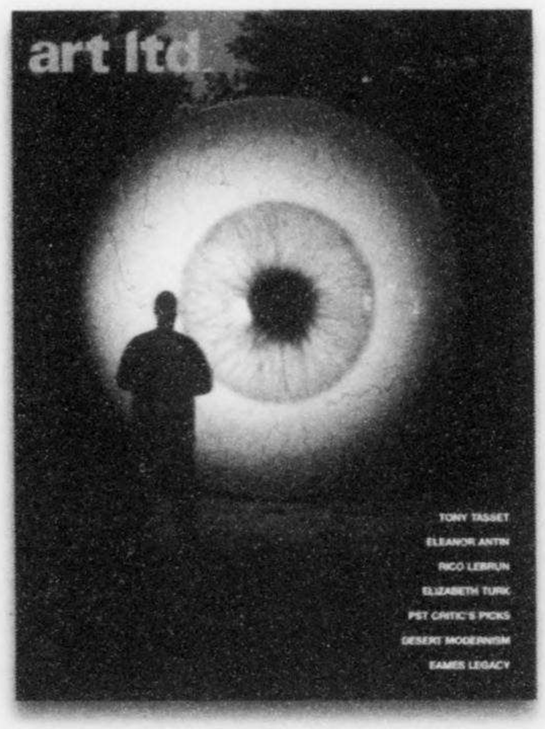


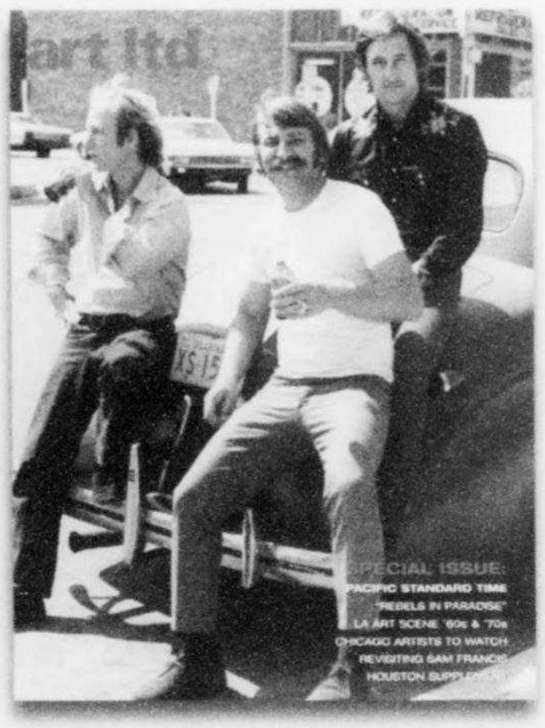
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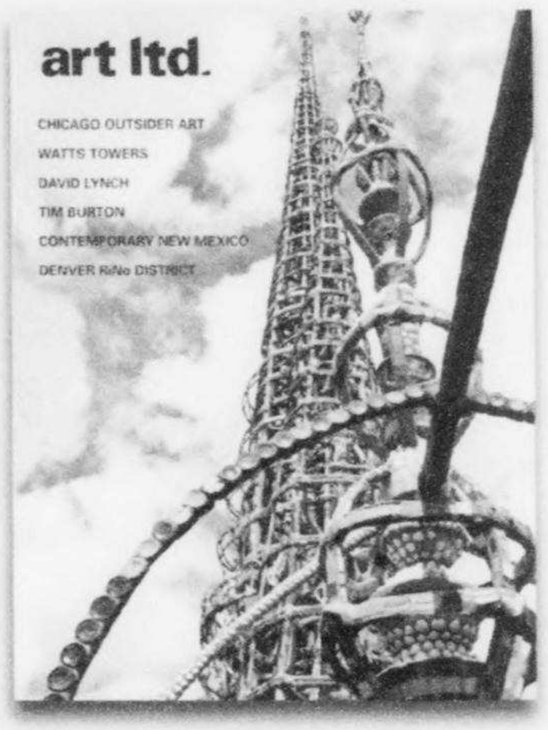
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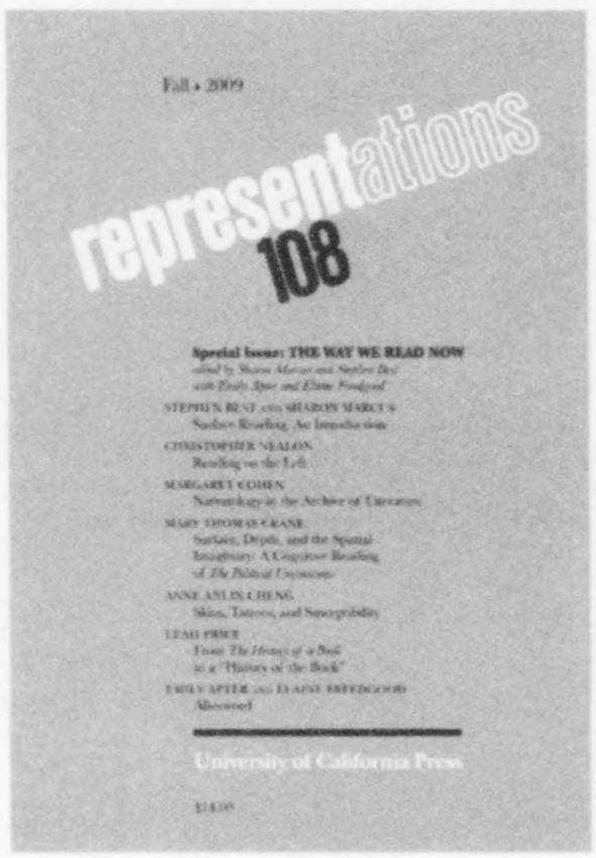
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