The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn
The Avant-Garde Won’t Give Up
KAREN KURCZYNSKI
A leading figure of the postwar avant-garde, Danish artist Asger Jorn has long been recognized for his founding contributions to the Cobra and Situationist International movements—yet art historical scholarship on Jorn has been sparse, particularly in English. This study corrects that imbalance, offering a synthetic account of the essential phases of this prolific artist’s career. It addresses his works in various media alongside his extensive writings and his collaborations with various artists’ groups from the 1940s through the mid-1960s.

Situating Jorn’s work in an international, post-Second World War context, Karen Kurczynski reframes our understanding of the 1950s, away from the Abstract-Expressionist focus on individual expression, toward a more open-ended conception of art as a public engagement with contemporary culture and politics. Kurczynski engages with issues of interest to twenty-first-century artists and scholars, highlighting Jorn’s proposition that the sensory address of art and its complex relationship to popular media can have a direct social impact. Perhaps most significantly, this study foregrounds Jorn’s assertion that creativity is crucial to subjectivity itself in our increasingly mediated “Society of the Spectacle.”

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For my mother, Elizabeth Kurczynski
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound appreciation for the many people who have helped this book come to fruition. Thanks first of all to Robert Lubar and Robert Storr at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, for their continuing support for my work on Asger Jorn. This project developed initially out of a seminar with Benjamin Buchloh, and his insights, as well as those of his students, many of whom have become colleagues and friends, have been invaluable. I am also grateful to Serge Guilbaut, Joan Marter, Ellen Landau, Francesco Pellizzi, and Hal Foster for their interest in and support for my research.

In the small field of Asger Jorn scholars, I have found many incredibly kind and dedicated colleagues. The work of Troels Andersen is foundational to this project and he has provided valuable assistance for it. Curator Karen Friis Herbsleb at the Museum Jorn has been an invaluable friend and collaborator on the 2014 Expo Jorn exhibition and catalogue that complements this project. Dorte Kirkeby Andersen, Lars Bay, and Jacob Thage also provided me with extensive help in Denmark, for which I am grateful. The entire staff of the Museum Jorn has been incredibly hospitable and generous. Working with Curator Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns of the Statens Museum for Kunst on the 2014 Jorn centennial exhibitions has been a pleasure, and has greatly contributed to this book project. Similarly, in the context of planning a major US Cobra exhibition for 2016, I would like to thank Diana Blanco, Rachel Diana, Rachel Talent Ivers, Barbara Buhler Lynes, and Bonnie Clearwater of the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale; Katja Weitering of the Cobra Museum Amstelveen; Brenda Zwart; and Hilde de Bruijn, along with the rest of the Cobra Museum staff in the Netherlands. Marion Lefebre and Kristen Accola provided considerable assistance in sharing the Lefebre Gallery archives. Jacqueline de Jong has been incredibly generous and I appreciate her friendship and support. I also sincerely appreciate the assistance provided by Pierre Wemaère and Bénédicte Bollaërt in Versailles, and the generosity of Otto Van de Loo, Marie-José Van de Loo, and Selima Niggl in Munich. The staff at the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Harvard University Fine Arts Library, the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag, and the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie also facilitated research for this project.
Many colleagues have supported my work on Asger Jorn in valuable ways. For their conversations, research assistance, editing, translation questions, and answers to random emails, I would like to thank Ruth Baumeister, Graham Birtwistle, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Karen Westphal Eriksen, Jennifer Farrell, Lauren Graber, Kerry Greaves, Axel Heil, Niels Henrik, Nina Hobolth, Henrik Holm, Stine Højholt, Jakob Jakobsen, Camilla Jalving, Michelle Kuo, Joao Leao, Klaus Müller-Wille, Anders Kold, Roberto Ohrt, Teresa Østergaard Pedersen, Stephen Petersen, Sarah K. Rich, Torben Sangild, Peter Shield, Willemijn Stokvis, Jens Tang Kristensen, Morten Thing, Anthony White, Janne Yde, and Tania Ørum. Steven Harris, Jenny Lund, Tom McDonough, and Nicola Pezolet have been invaluable in making this book possible.

In the USA, my early research and writing was supported by the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, a Fulbright Grant for research in Denmark, and a Foreign Language Area Studies grant administered through the Center for European Studies at New York University. Thanks to the American–Scandinavian Foundation and to the Grey Art Gallery staff—in particular Lucy Oakley and Lynn Gumpert—for their assistance and encouragement. Thanks also to my colleagues William Oedel, Timothy Rohan, Laetitia La Follette, and the rest of the Art History Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, as well as Dean Julie C. Hayes and the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, for supporting the final stages of my research. I have benefited from the insights and collegiality of numerous friends over the course of this project, including Susan Anderson, Nuit Banai, Agnes Berecz, Karen Butler, Kaira Cabañas, Yeon Shim Chung, Sarah Ganz, Amy Hamlin, Nate Harrison, Carla Herrera-Prats, Kenji Kajira, Peter Kalb, Jongwoo Kim, Roy Kozlowski, Karen Leader, Seth McCormick, Vered Maimon, Kent Minturn, Gloria Sutton, Mariani Lefas-Tetenes, Eddie Powers, Sofia Sanabrais, Karen Stock, and Greg Williams. Intellectual work happens only through dialogue, and I am grateful for our productive exchanges.

I must finally thank my family—above all my mother, Elizabeth Kurczynski—for making this all possible. I am also grateful to my father, Thaddeus Kurczynski, for his unswerving help along the way; my stepmother, Margi Gray, for her enthusiasm for Jorn’s work; my grandmother, Claire Mickelsen, for her kindness and unquestioning support; and my brother Peter Kurczynski and Helen Coleshill, for making the world a better place. Finally, thank you to my husband Bill Kaizen and our son Tal, for untold encouragement and laughter.
List of abbreviations

IMIB International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, originally MIBI (Mouvement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste)

LI Lettrist International, originally IL (Internationale Lettriste)

SI Situationist International, originally IS (Internationale Situationniste)

SICV Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism, originally SISV (Skandinavisk Institut for Sammenlignende Vandalisme)
In a 1962 painting, Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914–1973) declared with a graffiti-like gesture that “the avant-garde won’t give up.” The phrase did not appear in a theoretical text as was his usual practice, but as a gestural scrawl behind a painted girl in a confirmation dress, in _L’avant-garde se rend pas_ (Fig. I.1).

The work was exhibited at Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris that year, part of his “New Disfigurations” series, which continued his earlier series of “ Modifications” or “Détourned Paintings,” first shown in May 1959. All of these works developed directly out of Jorn’s participation in the Situationist International (SI), which he co-founded in Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy, in 1957 along with Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, Ralph Rumney, Walter Olmo, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone, and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio. The group became known for its theory of _détournement_ or “subversion,” an explicitly political practice of altering the material structure of a given medium to undermine its presumed message. The practice was intended to devalue (or in Jorn’s terms, revalue) the discourse or institution it attacked. In the Modifications and Disfigurations, Jorn added grotesque imagery or abstract painted or dripped additions to amateur academic-style paintings found in flea markets. The result? Art, or more specifically, painting, was revalued. Jorn reestablished painting in the postwar period as a critical practice relative to a host of new experimental mediums he also engaged in, from textual interventions in aesthetic theory to artist’s books, ceramics to large-scale tapestries. Each format embodied in unique ways his subversive aesthetics, a combination of agitation, irony, parody, materialism, populism, and overt critique of the social exclusivity of high art from classicism to modernism and beyond.

Although little of Jorn’s work made it into American collections, and for this reason his significant contributions remain relatively unknown in the United States, Jorn’s impact on European art and culture in this period was remarkable. He continually moved around the continent, forming new alliances and organizations wherever he went, from his earliest years as a student of Fernand Léger in the 1930s to his foundational role in several postwar artistic collectives. Jorn was a dynamic force in the European art world from the 1940s until his death in 1973. He acted as painter and organizer,
Asger Jorn, critic and social catalyst, anthropologist and aesthetic theorist, vagabond and financial backer, spontaneous abstract painter and artistic vandal. He worked in media ranging from painting to décollage, artist’s books to tapestry design. He played a crucial role in the development of artistic collectives during and after the Second World War including the Danish Helhesten group (1941–1944), the international collective Cobra (1948–1951), the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB, 1953–1956) the Situationist International (1957–1972) and the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism (SICV, 1961–1965). Although his work is often not considered as such in art historical discussions, Jorn’s activities were quintessentially avant-garde in their emphasis on group activities, manifestoes, and eponymous journals, overt experimentalism and rejection of traditional aesthetic principles, and explicit critique of mainstream
values of humanism, capitalism, rationalism, progressivism, and faith in technology.

Jorn investigated the relationship of gestural painting to expression, the concept of mythmaking, and art’s relationship to politics and popular culture at the same time as the early Abstract Expressionist work of artists like Willem De Kooning and Barnett Newman. Both Jorn’s Helhesten group and the New York School developed over the course of the 1930s and 1940s under the combined influences of radical politics, Surrealism, and abstract art. Yet Jorn worked in a vastly different context: a Europe first devastated by war, then preoccupied with reconstruction, increasingly concerned with the impact of the new mass media technologies, the vitality of local and folk communities in the face of globalization, and its own uncomfortable position, caught between the two Cold War superpowers. This context makes Jorn’s history uniquely relevant to discussions of painting and politics, in a period in which their relationship was drastically reconfigured. His understanding of art as a fundamental human expression of community, and an oppositional tactic rather than an individualist statement, makes his approach newly relevant to contemporary art and theory. In fact, only by taking account of Jorn’s work in the context of international cultural developments after the Second World War can the transition from the autonomous abstraction of high modernism (best exemplified by Abstract Expressionism) to the politicized engagements of the 1960s that led to global postmodernism be properly understood.

In *L’Avant-garde se rend pas*, Jorn has added not only the scribbled text, but also crude drawings of a bird and a stick figure and a simulated street wall behind the figure, perhaps referencing the Situationist practice of the *dérive*, a game in which urban space is reclaimed through wanderings coordinated by chance. In a final flourish, Jorn adds a Duchampian moustache and goatee to the girl’s face. This classic gesture of avant-garde provocation deliberately recalls Dada anti-art practices such as Duchamp’s own facial additions to the *Mona Lisa* in *L.H.O.O.Q.* Jorn lampoons the bourgeois propriety of both the girl and her representation by vandalizing her portrait. The facial hair and graffiti-like text are vulgar additions appearing in the “high-art” medium of oil paint. The text manifests behind the girl as if out of the repressed unconscious of the history of painting—or of the bourgeoisie itself whom modern art serves. The graffiti scrawl is no more an authentic message than the image of the girl, however, because its juxtaposition with the found painting exposes graffiti itself—and by extension, all avant-garde provocation—as a convention.

Jorn’s invocation of the avant-garde reads less as a declaration of his own sentiment than an assertion that the avant-garde had become a marketing tool, negating its original oppositional aims, and thus was reduced to a joke. The essay accompanying the 1959 exhibition of “Défourned Paintings” includes a poem written like an advertisement. Its tone, while ironic, explicitly describes his pictures as kitsch, easily digestible vessels of memory:

Be modern,
collectors, museums.
If you have old paintings, do not despair. Retain your memories but detourn them so that they correspond with your era ...¹

Jorn’s evocation of détournement explicitly related the works to the Situationist International, a self-described avant-garde. For the SI, the works exemplified the oppositional practice of rearranging pre-existing elements into a new situation that negated their original meanings.² For Jorn, however, they also negated the avant-garde’s very claims to progress, social status, and political insight. Jorn’s text describes art objects not as ends in themselves but as a “link between subjects,” and includes his critique of American Action painting as a narcissistic act “in which there is no more communication with the audience.” More importantly in relation to avant-garde and kitsch, it announces that any avant-garde conception of what Jorn terms “futurism” is based on a reaction to the past:

It is impossible to establish a future without a past. The future is made through relinquishing or sacrificing the past. ...Détournement is a game born out of the capacity for devalorization. Only he who is able to devalorize can create new values. And only when there is something to devalorize, that is, an already established value, can one engage in devalorization.³

Jorn concludes his essay with a direct reference to his earlier essay “Intimate Banalities,” in which, he drolly maintains, “I expressed my love for sofa painting, and for the last twenty years I have been preoccupied with the idea of rendering homage to it.” His Modifications were not merely a Situationist détournement, but also an homage to all Sunday painters, amateur painters, forgotten painters, street artists, and ordinary professional painters—part seriously, part in explicit ridicule of opportunistic avant-gardism.

Jorn was not the only one to observe in his day that the avant-garde had become meaningless as a ubiquitous signifier of status; numerous critics in Paris, where he lived for many years, had been decrying since the end of the war the increasing popularity of the term “avant-garde” as little more than a label of commercial success. Cobra critic Michel Ragon noted that while in principle the avant-garde concerns what is not yet understood and what does not sell, by the 1960s it had been reduced to a good publicity label.⁴ At the same time in Germany, Theodor Adorno observed: “The concept of the avant-garde, reserved for many decades for whatever movement declared itself the most advanced, now has some of the comic quality of aged youth.”⁵ Jorn shared with his friend Ragon as well as Adorno (a theorist he likely read years later) a neo-Marxist interest in the social role of art. Adorno described art as an experimental force that, although it frequently took the superficial form of experimentation for its own sake, became historically meaningful as a negative image of society as a whole.⁶ Adorno sees art’s critical potential as “itself social; it is counterpressure to the force exerted by the body social.”⁷
Adorno’s culminating volume *Aesthetic Theory* acknowledged Jorn’s shared concern that the prewar concept of the avant-garde was outdated because of its inherent faith in progress and the potential of technology that the unprecedented violence of Second World War revealed as wildly utopian. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s earlier account of capitalist culture, the authors critiqued Western culture as a society founded on “instrumental reason,” which limited human aspiration to technological progress and little else.8 *Aesthetic Theory* argued that even the avant-garde was powerless to change that society, but that its critical position was at least made concrete through art.9

This notion that art makes available to sensory experience some kind of socially critical truth was also fundamental for Jorn. Jorn shared the Frankfurt School’s general skepticism toward rationalism and technology, though much more toward the former than the latter. He made extensive use of technological reproduction in illustrated articles and artist’s books throughout his life, arranging photographic illustration into eccentric formal genealogies. Where Adorno’s pessimism led to a theory of modernism in a state of melancholic suspended animation between art and society, Jorn’s critical attitude accompanied his exuberant optimism about the potential of creativity continually to create new social relationships through art. His writings expressed a faith in ordinary people’s innate creativity to develop modes of expression outside the professional categories of the art world and the culture industry. Jorn conceived the true avant-garde not as a set of professional specialists, but as a collective social force made up of amateurs seeking new ideas and techniques through constant experimentation. His career spanned a major turning point in the history of the avant-garde in its shift after the Second World War, from a vanguard of artistic progress operating relatively autonomously from mainstream society to a less totalizing, more self-reflexive critical force operating within an increasingly complex, international, and technologically mediated society.

Some critics have gone so far as to claim that the only real avant-garde was the “historical” one that existed before the Second World War, following Peter Bürger’s influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, originally published in 1974. Bürger’s groundbreaking work identifies the historical avant-garde as the groups that made use of various practices, from collage to the Readymade, which he subsumes under the general term “montage,” before the Second World War in order to reject the Symbolist concept of aesthetic autonomy and to reconnect art and life.10 Although his analysis developed in the context of institutional critique in the 1960s and ‘70s, he originally ignored the Situationist International and other postwar avant-gardes, such as the Independent Group, who also formulated specific critiques of the institution of art. He thus incorrectly reduced the avant-garde to a purely historical phenomenon.11 I also find Bürger’s concept of a “neo-avant-garde” misleading, not only because it blatantly condemns everything done after the Second World War as a shallow revival, but also because it overrates the social impact and aesthetic
radicalism of the prewar avant-gardes. The contemporary definition of art itself as a social institution (as opposed to an object or medium), with its inherent tendency toward reification, necessitates the continual redeployment and reinvention of avant-garde tactics even in the contemporary period. Bürger himself observes that although the historical avant-garde seemingly attempted to destroy the general institution of art, it in fact succeeded in expanding the definition of art to include its institutionalization. I would add that the historical avant-garde established that any art that does not address its own institutional framework disavows its own social situation. However, Hal Foster notes that this does not mean that any later avant-garde fails automatically when cultural institutions recuperate the artists’ critical products. In this sense Bürger takes an absolutist view, allowing only the theorist (i.e. himself) any possibility of true critique. Clearly questions of “success” (which is absent in Bürger’s original analysis) or “failure” (to which he devoted most of his energy) provide little historical insight into practices that can only operate in response to specific historical conditions. Art is a social institution in a bourgeois society that marginalizes anything collective, ephemeral, unsellable, or critical of that ideology, so avant-gardes never did have the ability to single-handedly break it down. Jorn’s avant-garde project accomplished the most any such project can do, which is to create an art that engages politically with the institutional constraints of art and, equally crucial, creates an experience of openness, challenge, and critique for the creator, participant, or viewer that develops a social critique extending beyond the confines of art. It accomplished this, in part, the way many earlier avant-gardes did: by directly exploring kitsch.

Jorn’s text “Intimate Banalities” called for a new popular art, signaled by his description of “the artistic value of the banal” (Fig. I.2). He writes, “There are a great number of anonymous banalities that have an actuality, that speak out through the centuries and exceed every inspired achievement by our so-called great personalities.” With pictures of tattoo designs; popular, science, and fashion illustrations; a still from King Kong; and the angels at the bottom of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, already icons of popular taste, the manifesto declares amateur Sunday paintings and children’s scrapbooks “the best art today.” It appeared in 1941, only two years after American critic Clement Greenberg’s essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg famously defined the avant-garde as the location of innovation in culture, only accessible to the middle and upper classes, and dismissed kitsch as the mass-produced, watered-down copy made accessible to the masses. By the postwar period kitsch was widely seen as a mass-produced cultural product inferior to or derivative of “higher” cultural production. Jorn’s celebration of popular art and kitsch presents a prescient alternative to Greenberg’s theory, which largely defined “high” modernism in the postwar decades. Greenberg radically redefined the avant-garde by collapsing it with modernism into a modernist-avant-garde marked by aesthetic formalism and isolated from political engagement, collective concerns, and social meaning.
His assertion that the ultimate meaning of modern art is self-referentiality, and the dramatization of the medium its primary function, opposes Jorn’s interest in maintaining art’s relationship to social life and his explorations of kitsch. In Greenberg’s history, society drops out of the discussion completely as art becomes increasingly self-referential, and autonomy comes to mean “purity,” “standards of quality,” and an art “entrenched more firmly in its area of competence.” Instead of seriousness and objective standards of taste, Jorn took a lighthearted approach to a populist avant-garde. Jorn championed “popular art” in a general sense, as a catchall term for various forms of art, poetry, and music excluded by high modernism, from common sayings to visual clichés, kitsch and folk art to styles like Jugendstil or Gothic deemed “decorative” by modern architectural theorists. His open-ended use of the “popular” recalls Ernesto Laclau’s sense of the “people” as an empty signifier or marker of a series of groups, each with their own divergent interests, united only by the perception of their exclusion by the hegemonic group’s claims to universal values. Though Jorn became aware of Greenberg’s theory only later, his defense of popular art directly contradicted the dominant theory of modernism as a systematic theory formulated by the American critic to deliberately exclude the biographical, political, personal, and social aspects of artistic meaning. More broadly than kitsch per se, Jorn’s theory espoused folk or popular art as a signifier of creativity developed in a collective social context, whether handmade or mass-produced, in explicit opposition to hegemonic modernism.
Jorn’s support for the critical possibilities of popular art and kitsch opposed not only the incipient ideals of New York School modernism but also the self-proclaimed avant-garde in postwar Europe. The Parisian account of expressionist abstraction came to dominate the European art world in its conception of gestural painting as art autre (“other art”), Tachisme, or Informel. Michel Tapié, the polemical champion of art autre, a radical and ultra-individualist return to Expressionism, argued for the importance of unique, authentic, individual expression that resists all imitation. Where Tapié explicitly denounced boutique women who put together watercolor albums of flower bouquets and suave landscapes in a key 1951 text, Jorn’s “Intimate Banalities” praised Sunday painters and embraced the exchange of flowers as social communication, asserting: “there lies ... a direct symbolic power in the words ‘say it with flowers’ that makes this line one of the foundations of Danish lyric.”

Jorn developed an art that questioned the very definitions of modernism, popular art, and kitsch. His work explicitly critiqued claims for quality and standards of judgment in high modernism. Kitsch became one more element to be reexamined and reconfigured in Jorn’s active attempts to “revalue” culture, demonstrating that elements placed outside the purview of modernism could become the material for a more inclusive, popular, “living” art. Jorn recognized that in the contemporary period, when all meaningful artistic experiment is immediately institutionalized and professionalized, creative expression must actively critique its official or spectacular simulacrum in order to be viewed as authentic. Jorn’s tendency to see modern cultural production through an anthropological lens as part of a broader cultural field led to a critical art in which the social relationship among concepts of art, mass culture, folk culture, design, and kitsch was intrinsic to the meaning of the work.

Jorn’s work suggests a different model of art’s relationship to the social. It asserts that art should not just foreground its own materials and processes, but develop these in direct dialogue with life. He believed that expression is a basic human potential that the institutions of art actually deny ordinary people by turning it into the specialty of a few heroic geniuses. In an era when numerous artists and critics became preoccupied with the “death” of painting, Jorn reconceived painting, attacking its position as the primary medium of monumental public self-expression and advocating a new role for it as only one element in a diverse creative arsenal, a potential site of subversion and momentary creative engagement. At the same time, he suggested that traditional media such as ceramics and tapestry, which were devalued as outmoded and nostalgic in the era of modernism, should be reconsidered as popular alternatives to the celebrity culture of the art world and the impersonality of the mass media.

Alongside his artistic experiments in both individual and collective contexts, his writings about aesthetics and politics developed a unique set of parameters for contemporary art that both complement and expand those suggested by Abstract Expressionism as well as its antithetical successor,
Conceptual art. Jorn’s conception of art and politics redefines both, in the Situationist sense in which “politics” means not just the limited definition of parliamentary debates, but also contesting the relations of power manifested within everyday life. The terms “art and politics” have been reconfigured in contemporary aesthetics, not as separate spheres but as definitions of two specific arrangements of social and material reality with the continual potential to affect the other. I draw on philosopher Jacques Rancière’s definition of aesthetics as the promise of a new, emancipatory configuration of material existence. Rancière notes that:

Rancière argues that the problem of a critical art is to break through the dual possibilities inherent in contemporary aesthetics: on the one hand, the formalist notion that art symbolizes the ideal un-alienated community via its very autonomy from contemporary life, and on the other, the avant-garde conception of art’s material potential to dissolve into everyday life and thus eliminate its own separation, transforming aesthetics into ethics. While both possibilities are inherent in the Romantic conception of aesthetics, Rancière writes: “a critical art is, in fact, a sort of third way between the two politics of aesthetics.” Jorn’s work engaged on multiple levels with a postwar context in which the dominance of the formalist aesthetic in the 1950s ran aground amid the revival of avant-garde experiments in the 1960s. He followed the historic avant-garde approach of collective experimentation, critique of hegemonic modernism, and espousal of marginalized and deskilled forms of production throughout his life. His late 1950s painting, for example, specifically invests the vivid material presence of gestural painting with a Marxist materialism insisting that painting is contiguous with everyday life, while critiquing the tropes of modernist autonomy and originality characteristic of mainstream postwar abstraction.

Jorn directly challenged both the American Abstract Expressionist model and the European postwar tendency known as Informel, Tachisme, or Lyrical Abstraction. Abstract Expressionism is renowned for its existentialist-inspired notion of the individual artist struggling in obscurity, free from mundane concerns of success; its emphasis on emotional expression and authenticity; its radical spontaneity; its foregrounding of rhythm and gesture recalling jazz music and modernist poetry; its large scale of painting moving toward murals and environments; and its rejection of symbolism and “literary” references in an abstraction based on the direct qualities of artistic or industrial materials. Yet concurrent moves toward spontaneous abstract and gestural painting around the world have been marginalized by the critical concentration on the advance of American art over painting in France, the former center of avant-garde
experimentalism. Our current understanding of the 1950s has centered narrowly around the two poles of Paris and New York, and the transfer of postwar cultural authority from the former to the latter. The artistic impact of Jorn, an artist who presented himself alternately as Scandinavian and international at various points in his career, suggests a complete remapping of the cultural geography of the postwar European avant-garde.

Like the Informel artists, Jorn has been overshadowed by the New York School, with which he shares common ground. Although Cobra existed from 1948 to 1951 and was thus exactly contemporary with mature Abstract Expressionism, Thomas Crow observes that when the American style became internationally prevalent a few years later, “The Europeans thus found their aesthetic resources transformed into at least a tacit affirmation of American economic and military dominance.” The very success of Abstract Expressionism has interfered with our understanding of Cobra. The autonomous achievements of European postwar artists demand a more nuanced and relativized account. Not only did Cobra predate the widespread recognition of Abstract Expressionism in Europe, but its techniques of spontaneous composition, grotesque semi-figuration, and a primitivist approach to gestural painting—all elements shared with the New York School—developed directly out of the explorations of the earlier Helhesten group in Denmark during the war.

Jorn was unique for sharing the Cobra interest in gestural painting, interdisciplinary experimentation, and folk art, alongside the Situationist critique of art itself as a bourgeois activity. The SI ultimately considered visual art mere cultural capital with no agency to effect broader social change (a belief that led Jorn to leave the movement). While Jorn’s ongoing engagement with such neo-Marxist critiques of the institution of art was one of the driving forces behind Situationist theory, he also remained firmly committed to the idea that art plays a very specific role in society. For Jorn, art fulfilled a basic human need for expression. Yet even as modern art foregrounded personal expression for the first time in history, its institutionalization as a specialized sphere of the social elite cheated the non-artist out of a fundamental aspect of human experience.

This interest in universal creativity has led to the erroneous perception that Jorn was himself a humanist. The 1950s saw a revival of humanism, in the broad sense of a belief in the universality of secular, Western experience, social progress, and Enlightenment ideals of personal freedom, transmitted through classical education and nuanced by an economically liberal understanding of market freedom. That this humanist revival presented a cultural endgame only became clear as the anti-humanist approach of Structuralism and the politics of decolonization became prominent in the following decade. This larger story, which I can only tell as it manifests in Jorn’s writing and artwork, underlies my entire account of his project, since his work has been erroneously allied with postwar humanism when it at times manifestly opposed that doctrine. In *Pour la forme*, for example, Jorn writes that “diversity... constitutes
the aesthetic character of humanity, and this is precisely what is considered inhuman by the humanists. For them, humanism is a sort of normalized ethics that they take for the expression of humanity.” Jorn’s theory directly countered humanist notions of universality in his critique of the class structure of industrial Western society, and he rejected the humanist doctrines of social progress and perfectibility as well as cultural enlightenment through a limited canon of great works. He sought ways to reinvigorate popular expression while simultaneously resisting its cooptation by the institutions of contemporary life: the museum, the mass media, the publicity machine, and the rarified culture of Art.

The Situationist International, which was at the forefront of the critique of humanism in the 1950s, has seen a resurgence of interest in the contemporary period. Recent analyses of the SI have brought to light the context for Jorn’s artistic and theoretical projects in the late 1950s, but they have left his extensive contributions in both art and theory relatively unexamined. Situationist theory has been collapsed into the writing of Guy Debord, particularly *The Society of the Spectacle*, written ten years after the formation of the group. Most accounts of the SI marginalize the role of Jorn and the artists who were excluded by Debord’s group. Jorn’s work has been misinterpreted as a traditionalist reprisal of easel painting in contrast to the anti-art theory developed by the Situationist International. My account reexamines his eventual break with Debord in light of what caused their disagreement: Jorn’s belief in the potential of art as a sensory experience that facilitates a self-awareness fundamental to an active engagement with social life. The intense focus on Debord overshadows not only Jorn’s work, but also that of the expelled artists who founded several Situationist splinter groups: the Spur Group in Germany; the *Situationist Times* edited by Jacqueline de Jong; the Drakabygget group in Sweden, founded by Jorn’s brother Jørgen Nash and Jens Jorgen Thorsen; and the Situationist Bauhaus in Lund. These latter groups could be called “dissident” Situationists. The disagreement of Jorn and his colleagues with Debord on the issue of art-making suggests multiple effective configurations of the relationship of art, theory, and political action. Looking back on this contested history, it remains possible to recognize the contributions of each approach without discounting the others.

Jorn’s defense of painting as a relevant politico–aesthetic strategy throughout his life makes his history unique, given his direct involvement with the interdisciplinarity of Cobra, the radical anti-art tactics of the SI, and his experimentation with so many artistic media. In a postwar Europe newly saturated by visual media such as color magazine photography, television, and American widescreen movies, which increasingly seemed to colonize even the most private areas of subjectivity, Jorn considered painting a valuable site of singular expression. Such expression was an overt critique of the standardization and homogeneity of the postwar culture of reconstruction and consumerism. In this, he unknowingly agreed with many American artists. The Abstract Expressionists also supported a belief in the gesture of the hand.
as a refusal of the impersonality of the mass media, refuting technological
reproduction and mediated communication in large-scale, abstract paintings
and sculptures. Jorn, however, believed that the increasing power of the mass
media must be contested in collective activism and critical theory, not just by
upholding the autonomy of painting. Jorn specified the necessity for articulate
artists in contemporary society in his speech to the “First World Congress of
Free Artists” at Alba, Italy, in 1956, declaring:

“Create, artist, do not speak.” This speech has been made to us all too often by
people who claim to speak for us, think for us and act for us: politicians, intellectuals,
industrialists, teachers, art critics and others. And we have always been betrayed.
I create, I think and I speak ... The reason why the artist is today obliged to speak
out is not that the public demands a literary explanation of a certain kind of artistic
creation, it is that it always gets false ones.  

Jorn sought ways to engage art as a personal creative expression while at the
same time combating the cooptation of that creativity by political and cultural
authorities. It was the very Abstract Expressionist emphasis on individualism
and withdrawal from politics (and communication in general) that left its art
open to recuperation in the name of nationalist interests.  

The Situationist International in Europe developed a sophisticated theory
of recuperation to identify the inevitable annexation of avant-garde strategies
to official culture. Détournement was a counter-tactic, exemplified in Jorn’s
“Modifications.” The subversion of preexisting visual elements reveals the
struggle for cultural dominance as an ongoing process in which the subject
must take active part or else fade into oblivion as a passive consumer.
Although Jorn’s approach shares Abstract Expressionism’s opposition to
the mass media, its rejection of finish and naturalistic representation, its
emphasis on spontaneity and meaning developed through the viewer’s
momentary experience of artistic materials, it also diverges significantly.
Closer examination reveals Jorn’s aesthetic as one based on contingency
and interpersonal dialogue, not on the assumption of universal aesthetic
experience so fundamental to Abstract Expressionism. Jorn’s work suggests
not timelessness but immediacy; not truth but falsehood; not monumentality
but partiality; not freedom but possibility; not individualism but singularity;
not abstraction but incompletion; not seriousness but play; not gratification
but stimulation; not purity but transgression. 

In contrast to the focus on painting as the only “serious” medium in
both Abstract Expressionism and Informel, Jorn constantly explored other
media, from writing to ceramics, bookmaking, collage, prints, and tapestry.
In regarding the practices of editing and painting as equally creative, Jorn
developed an artistic approach based on appropriation and interpretation
as alternatives to a revised, more mundane notion of originality. My
investigation of his seemingly opposed projects and often self-contradictory
theories attempts to illuminate their underlying relationship without
discounting their internal ambivalence. Jorn’s experiments with ceramics
and tapestry also involved central contradictions concerning avant-garde experimentation versus the appropriation of traditional genres as well as modern kitsch. Like many of his contemporaries in Europe, Jorn attempted to reinvigorate genres associated with ancient local traditions in various countries, pushing them into the increasingly international, fast-paced and image-saturated contemporary age.

* * *

This text follows a roughly chronological narrative, exploring Jorn’s artistic and theoretical practices in-depth for each major phase of his career. Jorn was born Asger Oluf Jørgensen, to two schoolteachers, in the small town of Silkeborg in the Jutland region of Denmark in 1914. His father, a religious fundamentalist teacher, died when Jorn, the oldest of six children, was 13. As a teenager in Silkeborg, Jorn made his first attempts at oil painting in 1930, under the tutelage of regional naturalist painter Martin Kaalund Jørgensen (no relation to Jorn). Kaalund Jørgensen would provide Jorn his first exhibition in the group show “Frie Jyske malere” (Free Jutland Painters) in 1933. While studying at Silkeborg Teacher’s College in the early 1930s, Jorn also became involved in socialist activities with Christian Christiansen. Christiansen, a syndicalist organizer in Silkeborg who was critical of many of the mainstream Danish Communist Party’s views, introduced Jorn to Marxist politics. Jorn became Christiansen’s enthusiastic follower. He gave tours of an exhibition of Soviet poster art and children’s books in Silkeborg, and in 1935 did mural paintings on paper of workers on the march for Fastelavn (Mardi Gras) at the Teacher’s College. It is significant that even as he began to study oil painting, producing basic naturalistic landscapes indebted to the Danish modern tradition, some of his earliest images were prints in support of the labor struggles in his hometown in 1933–1934.

A small linocut from this period, entitled Morgenstund har guld i mund vi til vort arbejde ile (Golden light of morning bright is shed upon my labor) (Fig. I.3), depicts workers trudging toward a factory as if on the conveyor belt themselves, while the British pound symbol replaces the rising sun. Soon afterward, Jorn decided to become an artist rather than a teacher.

Two key encounters would advance Jorn in the direction of abstract art: his meeting with the Linien group and the theories of Wassily Kandinsky. In 1934, the group Linien (“The Line”) was formed by the slightly older Danish artists Richard Mortensen, Ejler Bille, and Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, and their first exhibition took place at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen. Jorn did not see the show, but heard about it from Kaalund Jørgensen and avidly read the Linien journal, which introduced him to the latest currents in international abstraction. Linien investigated abstraction as a method of communicating psychological meaning, and introduced Surrealism to Denmark. The group developed an interest in spontaneous composition based on the formal
abstractions of Kandinsky and Paul Klee, but also Salvador Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method and Pablo Picasso’s spontaneous linear forms. Through the Linien artists, Jorn made contact with other future Helhesten collaborators, including Egill Jacobsen, Else Alfelt, and Carl-Henning Pedersen. In 1935, Jorn acquired a copy of Kandinsky’s Point and Line to Plane. He underlined the pages extensively and scribbled observations in the margins such as, “The pictorial surface is a mirror image of the human soul, therefore inverted.”

He would do the same with untold later books, many of which are still in his personal library in the Museum Jorn in Silkeborg. He decided to seek out an education in abstract painting, not in Copenhagen’s Academy of Fine Arts, but with Kandinsky himself in Paris.

In 1936, armed with a student fellowship, Jorn left for France by motorbike with his first wife Kirsten Lyngborg (Fig. I.4). When he arrived,
speaking not a word of French, he found lodging through the Danish Communist Party headquarters. He soon realized that Kandinsky lived in seclusion and did not, in fact, have a school. He enrolled instead in the modernist Atelier de l’Art Contemporain, founded by Fernand Léger and Amedée Ozenfant in 1924, where he studied for about two years. In Paris, Jorn moved beyond the naturalistic Danish landscapes and socialist linocuts of his first works, practicing organic, Purist-style abstract compositions in class and experimenting in his free time with a wide range of Surrealist methods including flottage, the creation of an image by floating ink or paint on a watery surface. In Léger’s studio he met Chilean artist Roberto Matta Echaurren, a Surrealist who would later become an artistic collaborator in Jorn’s Italian “ceramics workshop,” and French abstract painter Pierre Wemaëre. Jorn, Matta, and Wemaëre all worked as assistants on Léger’s large mural Le Transport des forces for the 1937 Paris World Exposition. At the same exposition, Matta also assisted with Picasso’s Guernica, and Jorn worked under Le Corbusier to produce a monumental mural based on children’s drawings for the architect’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux. These early experiences were key in developing Jorn’s views on the relationship between art, decoration, and architecture. In the 1940s, Wemaëre took the unusual step of teaching himself how to weave, giving up painting in response to its seeming futility in light of the political events of the war. He would collaborate with Jorn on tapestry projects culminating in Le long voyage (The Long Voyage), installed in
the Århus Statsgymnasium in 1961 along with Jorn’s 89-foot ceramic mural completed in 1959. While Jorn studied organic–abstract painting under Léger, he met Alberto and Diego Giacometti through a mutual friend, the Linien artist Sonja Ferlov, whose studio was next door to the Giacometti brothers. With Ferlov’s future husband, black South African artist Ernest Mancoba, Jorn and Bille toured the newly opened Musée de l’Homme in 1938, admiring works from West Africa and the South Pacific. In the Parisian galleries, Jorn studied works by Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, and other Surrealists, which would have a long-term effect on his work. In 1938, back in Copenhagen, he also produced a series of illustrations in the manner of Ernst’s collage novels for a French translation of Danish Surrealist poet Jens August Schade’s book *Kommodetyven* (*The Dresser Thief*). Although the book itself was never published, Jorn’s illustrations were produced as prints in the late 1940s (Fig. I.5).

After spending one last summer in Paris, Jorn returned to Denmark in 1939 upon the threat of war. There he published *Pigen i ilden* (*The Girl in the Fire*), an experimental text by his Parisian lover Guénia Katz Rajchmann, translated and illustrated by Jorn (Fig. I.6).³⁷ This was one of many book projects on which Jorn collaborated throughout his life. Its imagery directly references the elegant biomorphic abstraction of Miró and Arp; Jorn was clearly positioned by this time to develop his own mature artistic practice directly out of Surrealism’s international outlook and experimentation with organic abstraction, non-Western formal and conceptual approaches, psychological and ethnographic investigations, and revolutionary politics. In the tradition of Surrealism, Jorn began to view art anthropologically, experimenting with primitivist abstraction while remaining critical of Western constructions of “the primitive” as well as the mainstream structure and workings of the art world. He explored the “insider” tradition of modernism alongside other “outsider” traditions whose position was contested or marginalized in the cosmopolitan Parisian scene: Danish naturalist modernism, popular postcards, pulp fiction, tribal art.

Jorn had already begun to break down the modernism–kitsch dichotomy in painting as early as the 1930s. He painted a work entitled *Bakken* in 1939, just after his return from Paris on the eve of the Second World War (Fig. I.7).³⁸ Bakken was an amusement park, a working-class alternative to Tivoli Gardens, situated in the Dyrehaven Park just outside Copenhagen. The Helhesten group would set up a private exhibition there two years later, entitled “13 Kunstnere i Telt” (13 Artists in a Tent), inspired in part by Le Corbusier’s tent structure at the Pavillon des Temps Nouveau. It would attract a mere 30 visitors among the thousands flocking to the park in the spring of 1941.³⁹ *Bakken*, which was included in that exhibition, demonstrates the subversion of forms and techniques Jorn encountered in France toward new aesthetic ends. The earthy colors and sand applied to the surface of the painting recall the dominant themes of rustic regionalism and organicism in French art in the 1930s, visible in works by Léger and his colleagues Ozenfant and Picasso.⁴⁰
1.5 Asger Jorn, Illustration for Jens August Schade, *Kommodetyven (The Dresser Thief)*, 1937. Print after original collage. 28.8 × 20 cm. Museum Jorn, Silkeborg
In Jorn’s painting, the thickness of the sand becomes a ground, both literally and metaphorically, for three colorful figures. The figures clearly reflect Jorn’s observance of tribal masks in the natural history museums of Paris and Copenhagen, visible in the right-hand figure’s ringed eyes, but they also show the formal impact of Miró and Klee, in their combination of flat biomorphic shapes in strong colors and thin black outlines. The outlines delineate what can only be described as little alien monsters in shell-like bodies, or even space helmets in the case of the one on the right. They recall 1930s illustrations of Martians in flying saucers from early science fiction magazines like *Amazing Stories* (the American comic was published in France already in the 1930s).

In Jorn’s painting, the long black lines stretching out from the comically tiny white “feet” of the left-hand figure evoke the long shadows of space images from a science fiction illustration. The reference reflects Jorn’s lifelong interest in comic books, sci-fi, and detective novels.

Jorn introduces kitsch details as a critique of high modernism from within, two years before he would announce his love of Sunday paintings in the *Hellhesten* article “Intimate Banalities.” The forms of 1930s abstraction materialize into little monsters in a parody both comical and biting. Jorn’s pictorial forms are in a sense the other side of pure abstraction, where abstract forms turn back into creatures. His pictorial world is already a world of fantasy defined by the uniqueness of deliberately strange, secondary and tertiary color choices and the combination of colored shapes with spontaneous linear forms that sometimes double as representations of body parts. This kind of work would soon be replaced by looser, painterly compositions in the 1940s. One of Jorn’s early explorations in painting, it already manifests his experimentation with a “kitsch-avant-garde,” in a lifelong attempt to fuse themes from popular culture with modernist forms believed to be critical of mass culture in their very abstraction and uniqueness.
During the Second World War, with Denmark occupied by the Nazi army, Jorn co-founded the journal *Helhesten*, and began his mature work as artist, activist, and organizer. While the end of the war is a standard historiographic dividing line between the modern and contemporary, for Jorn, as for many artists, it was less of a break than a continuation of his artistic evolution. The rest of this book reexamines Jorn’s artistic and theoretical project in the period from 1941 to the mid-1960s. Each chapter reviews a particular period in Jorn’s work while addressing specific theoretical questions and oppositions, such as myth versus mythmaking, expression versus Expressionism, and originality versus appropriation. The reader should be able to enter the text at different points and perceive a coherent genealogy of ideas and artworks for a particular period. Jorn’s production was so immense, complex, and contradictory that one book can never suffice to summarize it. Each chapter develops out of a detailed formal analysis of key works, situating my analysis as a response to Jorn’s visual and material concerns as developed directly in his artwork and theory.

Jorn’s work demands an approach that acknowledges the central paradoxes of his frequently confrontational experiments. He writes: “truth, here and elsewhere, is not unique but made up of several mutually insoluble truths bound up in a sort of paradoxical complexity, that truth is a complementary system of mutually contradictory truths.” In homage to Jorn, then, the chapter titles are oxymorons, beginning with these “Introductory Reflections.” Chapter 1, “Spontaneous Myths,” addresses the early 1940s, the period of Helhesten, during which Jorn formulated many of his mature artistic methods: the spontaneous formal development of painterly imagery indebted to Surrealist automatism, the method of working in a collective context centered around a theoretical organ (the *Helhesten* journal), and the interest in “mythmaking” as an antidote to the blind belief in mythology that the group observed in the Nazi occupiers of Denmark. Helhesten theorized mythmaking as a fundamental creative practice directly opposed to mythology and the reification of myth as...
a rationalization of social inequality. For the artists of the group, mythmaking
signified a way of conveying an imaginative experience using the materials
of painting, based on a spontaneous process of developing fantastic-abstract
elements, an approach to abstraction unprecedented in northern Europe that
would later find fertile ground in Cobra. Without knowing of the American
“mythmakers” Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, Jorn
and his Danish colleagues embraced mythmaking as a deliberate strategy
to free the painter from the constraints of representation, especially as those
became narrowly formulated by Nazi propaganda. The Danish approach
contrasts strongly with the American interest in myth, which was marked
by a greater focus on individualism and the classical Western heritage. The
importance of myth for Jorn did not mean a retreat from politics into personal
or imaginary concerns as he saw in late Surrealism’s attempt to create a
“New Myth,” but, rather, an understanding of subjective imagination as the
necessary foundation for active social participation and critical perspective.

Chapter 2, “Communal Expressions,” addresses Jorn’s collaborations from
the late Helhesten period, when he initiated the collective mural project at
Sophus Baggers Kindergarten in Copenhagen, through the late 1940s phase
of Cobra and its aftermath. This chapter discusses his collective mural
projects as complementary to his easel painting, both exemplifying his unique
approach to expression as a singular perspective developed in a collective
context. It develops Jorn’s approach to the expressive gesture in relation to
Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of the “singular” as opposed to the “individual”
or humanist subject. This meant a dialogic conception of subjectivity itself as
something developing in relation to social, cultural, and historical context.
It involved a dialogue with artistic materials, replacing the traditional
Expressionist conception of painting as externalizing individual emotions.
This chapter describes the collective murals produced in a festive context at
Bregnerød by the Cobra artists with the help of their children in 1949, in light
of the ongoing theoretical discussions unfolding in manuscripts and articles
published in Scandinavian architectural journals as well as the Cobra journal.
There, Jorn formulated his critique of Surrealism and unorthodox Marxist
interpretation of the role of popular culture and aesthetic expression in social
evolution. Jorn continued to engage with popular imagery, theorized by
Cobra as a universal, anonymous folk expression. He synthesized his interests
in popular art, mythmaking, local traditions, and the importance of public
expression in the mural paintings completed at the Silkeborg Public Library
in 1952–1953 known as *Af den stumme myte* (*On the Silent Myth*).

Chapter 3, “Material Visions,” explores Jorn’s mid-1950s experience
in Italy in the context of the International Movement for an Imaginist
Bauhaus, experiences which led to his 1959 murals at the Statsgymnasium
in Århus. It examines Jorn’s hybrid painting production in this period as he
experimented with new combinations of painterly, ceramic, and sculptural
materials and worked with Giuseppe “Pinot” Gallizio to develop the
“Experimental Laboratory” at Alba. Here, in light of his dialogues with old
and new colleagues in the Arte Nuclere movement and IMIB, including Tullio d’Albisola, Enrico Baj, Lucio Fontana, Karel Appel, and Constant, Jorn reconceived his approach to the social role of the avant-garde, comparing its discoveries to scientific breakthroughs, with unlimited potential purposes but without preconceived practical applications. Jorn’s work in this period shows a renewed engagement with Bachelardian ideas of the imaginative possibilities inherent in physical materials so prominent in the Cobra group, along with the matièrisme of Jean Dubuffet. Jorn experimented with material excess in critical opposition to the increasing economic materialism of postwar European societies such as Italy, which officially promoted design as the quintessential aesthetic discourse connecting rational planning to exuberant consumption.

This chapter explores Jorn’s collaborations in ceramics and tapestry. Jorn was drawn to local Danish ceramics in 1953, after recovering from tuberculosis in Silkeborg. He explored ceramics as a way of engaging with the traditional crafts of Denmark and Italy, where he moved in 1954, grounded in the Cobra understanding that local crafts embodied spontaneous collective expression. He invited artist friends from around Europe to two international “Ceramics Congresses” in Alba in 1954–1955. Meanwhile in Paris, Jorn and Pierre Wemaëre engaged artisans in an unusually collaborative approach to weaving that challenged the medium’s traditional hierarchy of designer to artisan. These experiments with traditional media culminated in the 10’ × 89’ ceramic mural and tapestry for the Statsgymnasium in Aarhus, completed in 1959 and 1961, respectively. The Aarhus projects resisted the aesthetic conventions of classical restraint and rationality characteristic of modern Functionalist architecture. They rejected the modernist notion of individual expression in favor of subjective dissolution in material excess, while reviving turn-of-the-century approaches to the decorative environment as a form of social critique. They also attempted to reconceptualize traditional artistic processes as simultaneously local and international, in order to formulate a decorative art appropriate for postwar industrial societies, an art simultaneously critical of nationalist discourses of traditional craft and avant-garde tendencies toward the advancement and supersession of art.

Chapter 4, “Jubilant Critiques,” addresses Jorn’s work of the late 1950s from the perspective of his founding participation in the Situationist International and ultimate disagreement with Guy Debord over the role of art in contemporary society. Here, the Modifications are explored in greater depth as exemplary works of détournement, the Situationist practice of subverting existing media to newly critical ends. This chapter describes the two unique artistic collaborations Jorn produced with Guy Debord and the Danish printers Otto Permild and Bjørn Rosengreen, Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires, in 1957 and 1958. In both books, Jorn and Debord appropriated kitsch images as a site of deliberate misreading and creative reconfiguration, combining images clipped from ads with Jorn’s printed painterly drips made from the top of a ladder in a parody of Jackson Pollock. These détournements
make clear the value of kitsch as a form of pleasure and harness its potential for subversion. The books sought to make personal the impersonal effects of technological reproduction in ways related to British Pop art, revealing the high modernist prohibition of all imagery, narrative, and politics in painting to be artificial and limiting. At the same time, this chapter differentiates Jorn’s understanding of the avant-garde from Debord’s belief in the supersession of art by politics and theory. It reframes the Situationist International as a multifaceted organization that made space for art-making both before and after the orthodox Situationists decided officially to reject artistic practice in 1961.

Chapter 5, “Authentic Ironies,” addresses Jorn’s late 1950s painting in the context of mainstream discourses of postwar modernism as he achieved his first international success. It examines paintings that combine striking expressive energy with irony or explicit critique. The critical formal operations in Jorn’s artwork, ranging from material decomposition to parody and pastiche, debunk the elitist assumptions and transcendental rhetoric of postwar abstract painting with which Jorn has been erroneously associated since he achieved art world fame. It addresses in greater depth the complex history of Jorn’s response to historical Expressionism with its claim to authentic expression, given that his early rejection of the term in Helhesten and Cobra gave way to an overt embrace of Expressionism as a Nordic tradition in the 1950s and ’60s. His sometimes polemical and historically exaggerated embrace of a Nordic Expressionist tradition was in fact a political response to the perceived threat to Scandinavian culture—which for Jorn stood for a particular kind of populism and political autonomy—embodied in discussions around the creation of a European Community. I argue that in contrast to Expressionism’s simpler conception, a new understanding of expression evolved in Jorn’s approach, as well as to some degree in Informel and Abstract Expressionism. The painters of these movements questioned the very possibility of “expressing” a subject now understood as fragmented and defined in interaction with an external environment.

A more comprehensive appreciation of Asger Jorn’s artwork and writing will provide a counterpoint to current assumptions about how art functioned in the postwar period, developing in the process “New Legacies” (the title of my conclusion) for understanding contemporary aesthetics, art, and activism. The art-historical conception of the 1950s and 60s has, perhaps inevitably, been shaped by myths: the alienated angst of the individual who turns away from society in order to live through painting, or the critical view that all painting is apolitical or reactionary. Jorn’s work foregrounds the paradox of embracing both perspectives at once, addressing singular expression in a collective context, spontaneous creativity as a human need both fundamental and necessarily mediated, and the linking of pleasure to social critique inherent in a neo-Marxist understanding of aesthetics. In a period when the term “avant-garde” became recuperated as a signifier of artistic greatness, his work maintained the historical avant-garde task of making painting critical
rather than simply celebratory—into a meaningful project rather than a status symbol. Jorn’s most significant contribution was his belief that “high” art must take into account its own tendency to eclipse the ordinary creativity evident in every facet of society … if we only know where to look.

Notes


7. Ibid., 33.


11. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “Den sidste avantgarde: Situationistisk Internationale hinsides kunst og politik” (PhD dissertation, Aarhus University, 2003), 71. Bürger has since acknowledged that both Cobra and the SI, not mentioned in his original theory, were distinct from “neo-avant-garde” movements like Pop or Nouveau Réalisme in that they directly continued the critical project of the prewar avant-gardes. See Peter Bürger, “Til kritikken af neonavantgarden,” in *En tradition af opbrud: Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, ed. Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, and Charlotte Engberg (Hellerup: Spring, 2005), 75.


31. As David Craven has described, this politicization occurred despite the artists’ own aversions to American nationalism. David Craven, Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

32. My work is indebted to the incredibly thorough artistic biography of Jorn by Troels Andersen, Asger Jorn: en biografi, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994).

33. Jorn had joined the Communist Party in the late 1920s but left the Party in 1933 along with a small group of young people in solidarity with Christiansen, when Christiansen was refused readmission to the Party. See ibid., vol. 1, 16–19.

34. “Linien” is used in italics when referring to the journal, but without italics it refers to the group itself. Likewise for “Hellhesten” and “Cobra.”

35. Andersen, Asger Jorn: en biografi, vol. 1, 36. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

36. Ibid., vol. 1, 40.

37. Ibid., vol. 1, 49.

38. Troels Andersen and Aksel Evin Olesen, eds, Erindringer om Asger Jorn (Silkeborg: Galerie Moderne, 1982), 178.


Denmark was occupied by the Nazi army in April 1940, and remained so until the end of the war. In these years of trial and hardship throughout Europe, artists in Holland and Belgium went hungry and endured strict censorship and oppression. In Denmark, artists had much more freedom since the Nazis moved in so quickly and under no opposition from the militarily weak Danish government.¹

In 1941, the first issue of the journal *Helhesten* (*Hell-horse*) appeared in Copenhagen. Jorn proposed the journal’s name, a Scandinavian folk symbol that directly defied the Nazis’ attempts to use Nordic mythological discourse to assert a common heritage. In Scandinavian legend, the Helhesten is a terrifying three-legged horse that announces the death of its victims when it appears at their doors. The horse was used as a sacrifice in some Viking cults and often appears in Viking ornament. Peter Shield calls it as potent a symbol for Scandinavia as the bull is for Spain.² It served as a powerful totem for a group of artists whose interests were allied politically with Communism, culturally with pre-classical, non-Western, and folk traditions, and artistically with bridging the generations of Scandinavian modernism from the older generation of Cubist- and Fauvist-inspired artists (known in Denmark as Expressionists) to the movement Jorn and the younger artists would soon label “spontaneous abstraction.” The Hell-horse became a totem for artists consciously flaunting “degenerate” art under the noses of the occupiers. It symbolized the defiance of a Danish people or folk (in deliberate opposition to the Nazi Volk) whose cultural symbols had suddenly become contested ideological territory.

Jorn and his colleagues believed that creative expression was inherently linked to a critique of bourgeois capitalism and ideas of social freedom. As Egill Jacobsen recalls, the young and idealistic artists regarded Helhesten’s activities as a direct intervention in social life, rather than simply an art movement. He says, “We felt that when people understood our pictures it would change society. Make society warmer, more human, free and tolerant.”³ Jorn would continue to uphold this view of the avant-garde as an emancipatory force in both art and life, writing in 1949 that, “The purpose
of art is first of all moral, and subsequently aesthetic.” In Helhesten, the possibilities of direct political action were circumscribed by the Occupation, which polarized society into collaborators, survivors, and resisters. Jorn took active part in the resistance, giving occasional shelter to refugees and hiding in his sofa a duplicator he used for various texts, including illegal papers for the resistance organization Frit Danmark and the Communist newspaper *Land og Folk*. Many of his colleagues participated in similar ways. The Occupation not only solidified the group’s self-understanding as a critical avant-garde, but also provided an immediate impetus to promote themes either rejected by the Nazis, like degenerate art, or co-opted by them in the promotion of their racist ideology, like Nordic myth.

*Helhesten* was published by Jorn from 1941 to 1944 with the help of his colleagues Jacobsen and Ejler Bille (both painters he knew from the Linien group), architect Robert Dahlmann Olsen, and archaeologist P.V. Glob. It was based on the model of the *Linien* journal and the Surrealist journals, especially *Minotaure*. It combined articles on art theory with translations of French literature, writing on poetry, folk songs, tribal art, architecture, and assorted other topics, alongside art reproductions including lithographs of children’s art and modernist photographs. For the Helhesten artists, the exploration of Surrealism and abstraction led to a breakthrough into a spontaneous art that negated the idea of the complete unified work and thematized creation in process. The primitivist tendencies in Cubism, the Blaue Reiter group, Surrealism, and ethnography (the latter two developing together in the French avant-garde) also inspired the artists to explore outsider and non-Western art and culture, in terms of both form and content, including folk tales and myth.

The Helhesten manifesto “Den ny realisme” (*The New Realism*) explains the artists’ lineage and declares their independence from prewar Expressionism. It describes how they began with the new “painterly language of form” of Cubism and Kandinsky’s abstract art, but rejected its legacy in the “intellectual aesthetics” of Constructivism and Purism. They followed Surrealist automatism in its most abstract forms, eschewing the “retrogressive psychophotographic” representational art of Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí. They saw in Surrealism’s more “vital” abstraction the possibility of psychic symbolism epitomized in the form of the mask. The manifesto calls for a more materialist, human-centered art. Jorn sent the text in English to Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art in 1945, along with copies of *Helhesten* and a selection of the group’s drawings and prints, proposing a touring exhibition of modern Scandinavian art. The American museum inspired the group as the first contemporary art museum in the world, although they received no direct response from MoMA. “The New Realism” sets out the two major artistic themes of the Helhesten period: spontaneous abstraction, which they consider a “post-expressionist” mode of artistic production, and mythmaking as a creative response to the simplistic belief in mythology they witnessed under Nazism. In Jorn’s Helhesten-era painting, the paradoxical juxtaposition of painterly spontaneity—a playful and indeterminate mode
of singular creation—with myth, an anonymous and collective narrative invention, produced a unique and unprecedented relationship between art and idealistic social aspirations in a time of fierce ideological struggles. While this spontaneous method and interest in fantastic stories developed out of Surrealist automatism and investigations of outsider expression, it led to a more radically open-ended aesthetic that would ultimately challenge postwar Surrealism’s more esoteric reinvestment in myth.

**Spontaneous abstraction**

Helhesten conceived abstract art not as a means to understand or express, but instead as a means to amplify direct life experience. At first, Surrealist automatism seemed ideally suited to this new conception of art. In the 1940s, Danish artists introduced into painting the avant-garde conception of automatism that had been used in literature and drawing, maintaining the provisional appearance of the first-stage automatic drawing without Surrealism’s second “finishing” stage. While Surrealism in the eyes of many observers both in Europe and America had notoriously failed to develop a truly automatic painting, automatism still represented a radical non-painterly technique of developing a more spontaneous and irrational creativity. Surrealist painting, meanwhile, had become institutionalized in its late, more naturalistic form in the work of artists like René Magritte and Dalí. Jorn had begun experimenting with techniques of automatic composition in Paris in 1938, when he dripped paint off the balcony in Giacometti’s studio onto sheets of paper below. In 1940, Jorn experimented directly with automatic techniques in a key painting he called *Det blå billede* (*The Blue Picture*, Fig. 1.1), a landmark of Jorn’s pictorial development in the 1940s. Jorn describes its creation as follows:

The *Blue Picture* is [sic] painted in 1940 at Refsnaes, in a period where I tried to free myself from the schooling I got in France, and at that time I worked with more or less automatic drawings—trying to work toward a freer and more fanciful picture style. I drew on transparent paper and then laid several drawings on top of one another, so that they were linked together and I could see them all at the same time. Each of the drawings was an abstract form, as clear and rich as possible. I simply tried to systematically vary some primary forms. I made thus a sort of ABC […] to find different possibilities of form. […] And then I let the chance effects provided by the layering itself inspire me. I tried to do the picture as fortuitously as I possibly could. It does not look very chancy, but you must remember that I had a severe discipline behind me. There is no compositional principle in the picture. All the small forms lie in a heap down through the picture. The composition came out of itself. I simply painted out from the one corner […] until the whole picture was filled. That was in fact something Bille started with at home.9

Using chance to create new compositions out of his own layered drawings, Jorn worked out of compositional principles he learned from Léger, toward the use of flat areas of color contrast and playful abstraction inspired by the
work of Pablo Picasso, Jean Arp, Joan Miró, and Paul Klee. His understanding of these artists also grew out of discussions with his older Linien colleague Ejler Bille, who was mistakenly credited with painting the Blue Picture in the early 1940s.

The image is almost completely abstract, despite numerous dotted forms that evoke eyes or masks in a manner common in Linien artwork. The overlapping of shapes to create a third color was pioneered by Klee, although here Jorn adds another dimension by frequently making the third overlapped shape a new color altogether. This can be seen, for example, at the center of the creature-like red form at the upper right, where an orange diamond shape appears in the overlap of red and purple. Certain forms in the picture directly refer to Miró, for example the yellow profile “face” right of center with the Miróesque hair-like black lines projecting outward. The biomorphic forms float on a thinly painted, patchy blue background, itself marked with doodle-like lines, but the flatness and opacity of the small forms prevents any real illusion of depth. Distinctly unbalanced, it is not quite an allover composition. The forms seem to float up from the lower left, and rebound...
against the upper right corner to create a disorderly motion across the surface. The alternation of colors could be interpreted as a kind of compositional balancing, but it creates more precisely a dynamic visual rhythm across the painting. The colors begin to take on an importance of their own. They seem arbitrarily—spontaneously—distributed. Critic Ole Sarvig commented that the "Spontaneous Abstract" artists developed a painterly spontaneity that depicts the actions of a few moments instead of Klee’s images of a psyche amassing over time. The bright, complementary, rhythmic colors and flat shapes emphasize this impression of almost instantaneous pictorial development. The picture’s abstraction makes meaning reside almost entirely in process, since its composition is derived by automatism. The atypical green border Jorn painted around the edge may have been a way of emphasizing the picture’s early importance for him.

The Blue Picture illustrates not just Jorn’s interest in exploring a Surrealist technique, but ultimately his development of a new compositional method that abandons automatism for spontaneity and indeterminacy. He would by the end of the 1940s establish a “method” of both drawing and painting without procedural rules in which the final image was unknown, even though it was often made up of elements worked out beforehand in studies. In his catalogue raisonné, Atkins considers the Blue Picture derivative of Ejler Bille’s work, and less significant than the more traditionally composed picture Saxnäs, painted in 1946 (Fig. 1.2), but this seems a traditional art–historical judgment that values static harmonies (read: boring pictures) over catalyzing dissonance.

The painting was based on one of several automatic drawings Jorn created in this period, executed in ink without lifting the pen. The most famous of the automatic drawings that led up to Saxnäs, an ink drawing of 1946 (Fig. 1.3), became the basis for an artistic experiment in flirtydighed or “multiplicity of meanings.” Jorn asked a number of his colleagues in Denmark and Paris to lay tracing paper over the drawing and draw the significant forms they perceived in it, in a kind of reversal of his process for the Blue Picture (Fig. 1.4). This experiment was conceived as a negation of the strictly sexual, Freudian readings of abstract art common in Surrealism and promoted in Denmark by psychoanalyst Sigurd Næsgaard, who had analyzed Jorn and several of the Helhesten artists. Instead, it explored the possibilities of varying interpretations of artistic meaning, demonstrating that the same forms could produce diverse meanings by generating new images. This experiment demonstrated the intermediate status of the artwork as an open work, produced by means of an active dialogue that includes the viewer.

Ideas of collective creativity and openness are also embedded within the Blue Picture. Jorn emphasizes the collective creative aspect of the Blue Picture by openly acknowledging in his description Ejler Bille’s role in the process of creating it. Bille inspired Jorn’s compositional experiment by developing a few years earlier an indeterminate manner of creating a picture,
1.2 Asger Jorn, *Saxnäs*, 1946. Oil on masonite. 153.5 × 123 cm.
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen
1.3 Asger Jorn, Untitled drawing, 1946. Ink on paper, ca. 31 × 22 cm.
Location unknown. Image courtesy of the Museum Jorn
Given the context of Jorn’s extra-painterly concerns in the early 1940s, the idea of openness implicit in the indeterminate compositional process also takes on social and political dimensions. Openness to the new would become one of Jorn’s central artistic themes. He argues in *Held og Hasard* that curiosity about the new and unknown is the beginning of all aesthetic activity.

As was the case for early Abstract Expressionism, openness became an important aesthetic principle because it was threatened in the war years, when meaning was insistently politicized.

The development of Surrealist automatism into a more abstract spontaneous painting in a work like the *Blue Picture* has been largely considered in formalist terms as a mere pictorial experiment in the history of Danish modernism. Yet this view directly opposes the social and political dimension intended by Jorn and his colleagues. Ultimately, Jorn would view Surrealist automatism as inadequate. He argues in 1948 that it does not allow the artist enough control over the pictorial form, and fails to fulfill the Surrealist intention of providing the unconscious with a voice because artistic materials were by definition impersonal. Jorn writes that automatism merely results in “endless meaningless lines without any larger psychic meaning.”

In other words, the unconscious could not be given a pictorial voice because the forms of art came out of the social world. Painterly materials were the sensory point through which a social dialogue could begin. Helhesten understood that thought and desire were not only inherently mediated by materials but developed in dialogue with them, making true automatism impossible. Jorn’s group shifted the artistic focus from a psychological framework to that of momentary...
experience in the social world, disregarding the rhetoric of the unconscious as part of the individualist ideology that the Helhesten group rejected.

In the “New Realism” manifesto, the Helhesten artists assert that their “most meaningful and difficult process of liberation, which has given our art its distinctive appearance, is the transition to the liberation of color, to painterly spontaneity.” The artists describe spontaneity as a compositional method, but it is intrinsically impossible to make into a deliberate process and can only be interpreted as such retrospectively. Spontaneity is always nothing but an appearance of spontaneity. The Helhesten artwork conveys it by means of a sense of childlike freshness and playful indeterminacy. During the war and Occupation, spontaneity became fundamental precisely for its perceived resistance to ideology. Indeed, spontaneity becomes a major theme in the 1940s for critical theorists like Max Horkheimer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a fundamental aspect of human nature that they perceived to be under threat. Fascist and Socialist Realist art were the supreme examples of planned composition at the time, while in capitalist society, according to Helhesten, constructivist abstraction created meaningless objects for rational intellectual contemplation. Spontaneous painterly abstraction became a primary method of communicating ideas of freedom in a climate of repressive political polarization.

Post-expressionism

The complex relationship of Helhesten’s spontaneous abstraction to historical Expressionism was equally shaped by wartime politics. A key work of 1944, Røde syner (Red Visions, Fig. 1.5), clarifies Jorn’s understanding of expression as spontaneous and dialogic rather than individualist, as in historic Expressionism.

The work’s title refers to the Romantic and Expressionist understanding of the artist as “seer,” evoking the notion of inner sight. The compositional process, however, belies this reading. Jorn developed the composition spontaneously, sketching roughly geometric shapes contoured in blue, “piled up” on each other as in the Blue Picture. Their distribution in an abstract “I” shape across the surface visualizes this process of indeterminacy. We could imaginatively supply an image for it to represent—such as a tree of life or a heraldic double-headed eagle—but any such reading remains conjectural because the only formal elements in the work are small geometric forms animated by the addition of dots for eyes, arranged in an accumulative, indeterminate composition. Despite the sinister import of the title in relation to the ongoing war, as well as the revolutionary associations of the color red, the diminutive figures appear almost cheerful in their bright colors and interactions with each other; for example, the “kiss” between two rounded heads in the top center. The yellow and red “suns” and washes of background brushwork in equally bright colors reinforce the concept
of an imaginary landscape common in Jorn’s Helhesten work. Because the process was spontaneous, however, the resultant “visions” are less those of the artist than a dialogue between artist and the material interactions of hand and paint.

The visions are in a sense those “of the painting” with its many child-like eyes, rather than those of the artist; and viewers are invited to read the visions as their own. In such works, the Helhesten artists shifted from the classic Expressionist idea of the externalization of the inner emotions of the artist to a new understanding of the process of art making as something that evokes social and psychic life in a material language of form. Such a work defines the mind itself as a complex site of creativity and exchange among internal and external signals, images, and memories. Helhesten broke with classic Expressionism to reconceive expression as a dialogue between materials, socially determined meanings, and the imagination rather than as a distorted representation of nature. It replaced the direct expression of the artist’s psyche with the dialogic symbolization of meaning in a communal visual language derived equally from modernist abstraction and popular imagery.
Jorn developed in the Helhesten years his conception of an artwork whose material singularity acts as a point of departure for the projected meanings of the observer, even as Jorn and his colleagues maintained the classic Expressionist understanding that art in general expressed human emotion. Much of Jorn’s early terminology of expression came directly from the discussions of Expressionism in Denmark (where “expressionism” was a general term for all modernist painting) and the German Expressionism of Kandinsky. In one of his earliest interviews, Jorn states in language directly reminiscent of Kandinsky that his goal is “a pure painting, which through color, line, and plane precisely expresses my feelings.”

The Russian artist’s paintings, theoretical writings, and _Blaue Reiter Almanach_ had a profound effect on the Linien group with which Jorn had first exhibited in 1937. From the _Blaue Reiter_ the Helhesten artists took up several basic elements: the concept of “inner necessity” to summarize the emotional import of the work, the use of abstraction to allow the elements of the work to speak for themselves, the emphasis on harmony and rhythm, the interest in folk and non-Western art, and the importance of what Kandinsky described as “unskilled” methods to allow more direct expression.

The _Blaue Reiter_ was a key influence on Jorn, unlike the Brücke Expressionist group, which was much less concerned with folk art or the formal characteristics of abstraction. Still, Jorn and his colleagues considered themselves post-Expressionists. Thirty-five Kandinsky works were included in the Linien exhibition of 1937, notably titled, “Post-Expressionism-Abstract Art-Neoplasticism-Surrealism.” The designation “post-expressionism” demonstrates that the Danish artists already considered Expressionism a movement of the past, succeeded by geometric abstraction and Surrealism.

At the same time, the artists allied themselves politically with German Expressionism in protest against the Nazi persecution of it as degenerate art. Under the Occupation, they described their work as the “free” and “spontaneous” alternative to the propagandistic imperatives of Nazi visual culture. A cofounder of _Helhesten_ , archaeologist P.V. Glob, referred to it as “a magazine for degenerate art.”

In his writings of the 1940s, Jorn describes the Helhesten turn to “painterly spontaneity” as anti-classical and organic, writing of the Nazi promotion of an idealistic classical representation as inherently destructive and “unnatural.” In several texts, Jorn embraced the idea of Western Enlightenment culture’s demise embodied in painting that blatantly disregarded both academic skill and classical beauty. When he wrote, “We are for decomposition, the destruction of classical composition …” Jorn incorporated the formal markers of degenerate art without its racist connotations of social devolution.

The Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937–1939 was the culmination of the Nazi attack on modern art. It most vehemently targeted Expressionism. Emil Nolde, an artist whom Jorn would later praise in his personal canon of Nordic Expressionists, was represented with the greatest number of images in the show, despite his personal Nazi sympathies. The exhibition
also foregrounded the artists explicitly favored by Helhesten: Arp, Ernst, Kandinsky, and Klee.\textsuperscript{27} The Nazi presence in Denmark during the Occupation continued to characterize international modernism as degenerate art, and praise its idea of Nordic art as the streamlined neoclassical depiction of Aryan bodies. Helhesten’s flaunting of traditions of spatial representation, finish, composition, painterly skill, and naturalism would all have qualified its artwork as “degenerate” at a time when the Germans favored themes of heroic legend and forms of neoclassical idealism, aggrandized mythic images rather than Helhesten’s deliberately infantilized, symbolic–abstract ones.

Although the Nazis did not crack down on the publication of Helhesten, its celebration of degeneracy did not go unnoticed. In 1942, a Danish journalist wrote in the publication \textit{Fædrelandet} (\textit{Fatherland}) an article called “Vanartet kunst” (Degenerate Art), illustrated with an Ejler Bille drawing. The text discussed “the spiritless nonsense that proliferates under the label ‘abstract art,’ [which] belongs to no homeland” and which “National Socialism will take with a firm hand [and] cast […] into the fire like the weeds they are in the garden of art.”\textsuperscript{28} The painters, meanwhile, reclaimed the label as their own. Carl-Henning Pedersen, who had personally witnessed the Degenerate Art exhibition in Frankfurt in 1939, declared, “All good art in Denmark today is ‘degenerate.’”\textsuperscript{29} The political polarization of the war served to strengthen the Helhesten group’s ties to historic Expressionism as well as Scandinavian myth precisely when these areas became ideological battlegrounds over Nordic identity.

The Danish artists’ embrace of degenerate art did not, however, mean that they embraced degeneracy as a racial concept. They rejected the racially driven theories that led to the possibility of judging any artistic expression as morally decadent or debauched. Jorn criticized Otto Spengler’s much discussed view that Western culture was in “decline,” and Ejler Bille wrote that the idea that quality in art related to a difference between higher or lower races was nothing but racial prejudice.\textsuperscript{30} Such prejudicial views conflicted with Helhesten’s enthusiasm for non-Western and popular art and the group’s positive conception of “nature” as an all-encompassing force, related to human innocence and incorruptibility.

In the “New Realism” manifesto, the Helhesten artists argue that although their art may superficially recall Expressionism, it is in fact a new realism rather than an expression of subjective concerns. The artists state:

\begin{quote}
Our painting can seem to share similarities with expressionism, but only in a superficial way. Our art is without guidelines from aesthetic, emotional, or any higher art, but is based rather on a pure, vital development. […] Our art is a new realism based not on an ideal structure as in Renaissance painting, but on materials’ natural possibilities of elaboration, and on free human development.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

The manifesto took as its starting point Léger’s concept of a “new realism” based on the formal qualities of abstract painting, articulated first in his 1910 writings on Cubism. For Léger, the sensual presence of color presented a
sensation of material reality more fundamental than any represented form. He maintained that in modern culture subject matter had become superfluous due to the increasing presence of the popular theater, sentimental literature, and illustration. Representation, therefore, according to this Cubist theory of abstract art, had become secondary and reality came to mean the physical, literal qualities of the work. Jorn quotes Léger on the directness of color in a 1944 article, writing: “Color is a vital necessity. It is primary matter, like water or fire.” The Danish group emphasized fantastic subjects, which they perceived as more liberating precisely because they were freed from the conventions of representational form, specifically as a way to focus more on the material qualities of the work as their own form of “new realism.”

The Helhesten conception of the reality of the viewer’s experience before the work was fundamentally different from classic Expressionism. The formal similarities with Expressionism, including the emphasis on the deliberately artless gesture, the intense and unnaturalistic colors, and the formal and ideological exploration of the art of non-Western cultures, children, and the insane, did not indicate a shared world view, because Helhesten applied them as part of its specific social and cultural program of communitarianism and social protest to the Nazi regime. The earlier Expressionists with their café and city scenes, bathers, studio models, and ethnographic still lives, foregrounded the representation of modern life rather than theorizing the creation of new realities in their works. The Helhesten manifesto asserts that the new emphasis on fantasy and spontaneity distinguishes their work. It states further:

We depart in our art from the fantastically created phantom instead of the human model or still life in contrast for example to Picasso. On this point we follow more closely artists like Klee and Miró, but work by contrast in our painterly methods on the basis of Picasso’s immediate painterly spontaneity and material control of the brush.

Their “new realism” meant unprecedented and spontaneous manifestations that, while not based on physical reality, created real, direct sensory effects on the observer. Works like Red Visions manifest a development of fantastic imagery combined with sensuality, through color and organic line, and in Jorn’s later 1950s work, the visceral textures of paint. Such work stimulates both mentally and physically. The historical Expressionist model depended on references to visual reality represented in the work, and operated on the assumption that visual distortions of that reality registered the preexisting emotions of the artist’s psyche. Helhesten considered the work as creating its own new reality, a concept Jorn continued to develop later and one that also appeared in Abstract Expressionism.

According to Hal Foster, Expressionism denies its status as a language, purporting to come directly and immediately from the depths of the self. The Helhesten artists, however, conceived their art as a form of symbalic expression structured explicitly like a language. They accepted a more complex model of the self than the earlier Expressionists, based on their
experience with psychoanalysis. Virtually all the Helhesten artists entered psychoanalysis during the war, drawing on their familiarity since the days of Linien with Surrealism and its Freudian understanding of the layered self that conceals an unconscious. They considered psychoanalysis a useful method of therapy, but unlike the Surrealists, they believed it had little to do with art. The symbolic interpretive range of psychoanalysis was too limited, especially in the strictly Freudian methodology of Sigurd Næsgaard, the analyst who worked with the Danish artists. Næsgaard interpreted artwork in rote ways that Jorn perceived as crudely sexual. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis clarified for the artists a basic understanding of a complex self, split into layers sometimes directly conflicting in their desires.

Alongside this new understanding of the psyche, Helhesten developed a new recognition of art’s role in mediating—literally, creating and defining—the subject. In Helhesten theory, the artist’s performative presence was essential because of the stress on the act of creation, and the painted mark was primary as a physical trace, an indexical sign, of the artist. As Pedersen wrote in *Helhesten*, “In a person’s script lies his whole personality.” Although simplistic, Pedersen’s statement reflects concurrent developments in graphology, the science of handwriting that received increasing study in the 1940s. In Jorn’s more complex theory, this understanding of art as an index of personality was combined with both a recognition of the mediation of creative ideas in the language of form and a shift in emphasis from the idealized artist to an everyday artistic creation.

Jorn’s “Prophetic Harps” essay states that “a picture is written, and writing is a picture.” The gesture remained important as an index of the artist, but the connection with writing also recognized picture making as a symbolic language, extending beyond the individual. This recognition of painting as a socially mediated language superseded the notion of direct expression.

In “Prophetic Harps,” Jorn describes this difference in emphasis as the “transition from a calligraphic to a graphological interpretation of writing,” meaning the move from an understanding of handwriting as a personal style to the emphasis on writing as “meaningful” or “expressive.” He thus conceived of handwriting and art-making as, in a way, tools for transmitting meaning about the complex subject who created them to the observer who interprets them. This view coincided with Helhesten’s belief that creativity was a basic human potential, not unique to artists. The group considered the artist a common or everyday individual with no form of spiritual calling and no necessary talent or training. As Bille stated, “There is no ability in art.” For Helhesten, the artist became less central as a special social category, a personality legibly indexed in artistic forms, both as a critique of the exclusivity of economic access to artistic training and for the practical reason that no such schema of legibility was possible since the subject was no longer a known entity. The important aspect of writing or visual expression was its communicatory function rather than its exclusive meaning as an index of a particular person.
The Danish artists refused the classic Expressionist idea of a simple psychic interior existing prior to its manifestations on canvas; the idea that, as Kandinsky described it, “artists [seek] to express in their work only internal truths.” Any notion of a single, monolithic inner truth would be impossible according to the basic psychoanalytic model. With their emphasis on spontaneity, the Helhesten artists insisted instead that meaning developed through the experience of material creation itself. They asserted painting’s status as a material language in its physical immediacy rather than psychic realism. Ejler Bille was one of the first to realize the primary importance of materials, writing in the 1930s that Cubism and abstract art introduced an increased interest in plastic form linked to a rejection of naturalism and a deeper understanding of primitive art. He argued for a materialist rather than a metaphysical understanding of art in Helhesten.

This move away from individual expression also contributed to the shift in meaning from an Expressionist paradigm to the work’s effect on its audience. Instead of the alienated, withdrawn subject of Romanticism and Expressionism (which extends into postwar Abstract Expressionism and Existentialism), Jorn asserted a new idea of an extroverted subject playing an active role in society. The Helhesten period initiated the ideas of the artist as liberating the creative spontaneity of the ordinary person, and documenting the creativity of ordinary people. This approach actually built on the ideas developed by Kandinsky, who first explored popular art and theorized the effect of artistic forms on the observer. However, whereas Kandinsky’s formal theories explicitly intended to help the artist communicate inner emotions more effectively, by creating a set of compositional directions, Helhesten developed an approach where the observer became the participant in, and ultimate determinant of, meaning. Jorn would develop these ideas theoretically in the Cobra period, writing that art is not a mirror of nature or an epistemological tool for understanding the psyche, but instead has the potential to directly alter these things.

Painting as mythmaking

The understanding of art as a language created socially and collectively also structured Helhesten’s understanding of myth. The exploration of fantasy and myth was a major international development of the 1940s, building on the emphasis on material reality in earlier abstract art. The Danish artists, in effect, combined the Blaue Reiter’s understanding of art as expressive rather than representational, minus its spiritual dimension, with Surrealism’s use of automatism to free the mind from preconceived notions, minus its strict Freudianism. Bille declares, for example, that abstract art is not spiritual, but a new perspective related to recent scientific and dialectical thinking. The development of mythic and fantastic beings freed the artwork from all pretenses to representation and embodied meanings left open to the viewer’s
interpretation. They conceived of fantasy not as individual but collective, culturally defined imagery. Images appear in a process of formation in Helhesten artworks. The abstraction of the picture emphasizes the fantastic transformation of images, rather than their fantastic identities. The artists argued that their fantastic forms were more concrete than conventional images because they existed exclusively in the painting. Egill Jacobsen emphasizes the open nature of these symbols:

Fables and myths in visual art are not representational, but exist as independent expressions or beings. [...] Creative, abstract painting [...] is a bridge over prejudice and angst, [...] from experience, which is its content, the picture has thus [...] become an independent world, open and full of meaning.”

The expressive reimagining of mythic imagery was a symbolic transformation of the society that developed it. The artist could thus implicitly suggest new potential meanings and new communities, albeit on a visionary or utopian level. The turn to mythic images was not a retreat from politics into personal imaginary concerns, but rather an understanding of subjective imagination as the necessary foundation for social identity and a critical perspective on day-to-day reality.

The Helhesten artists argued that myths developed naturally out of everyday life, but that creativity itself was a form of mythmaking opposed to the belief in myth. A 1941 Helhesten article by Niels Lergaard opposed the “mythmaking” artists to the “believers of myth,” likely meaning the Nazis. Lergaard writes:

This does not mean that people should live their lives according to mythic belief; on the contrary, belief in myth is ... an instrument that can be applied towards all kinds of mythic deceptions, whether of a religious, political, scientific, or artistic nature, while the mythmaking imagination is life’s positivity itself … The mythmakers, through imagination, experience life in the moment in its free and primitive rhythm, a life’s rhythm, which is the undertone of all human sympathy … and therefore the only basis on which pacifism can be built.

Lergaard, a lyric-naturalist landscape painter, left scant writings behind; his article on mythmaking was likely the result of the intense group discussions that took place before each issue of Helhesten. The specific source of Lergaard’s use of the term “mythmaking” remains unclear. Yet Jorn echoed Lergaard’s opposition of the myth-believers to mythmakers in several texts. He writes in the Situationist period, “For me all art is an infinite multitude of mythic creations, and [...] I oppose free creativity to a return to the belief in a single imposed myth, or system of myths.” It is a standard assumption that painters turned to myth in the 1940s as a reaction to the terrible reality of the Second World War, but myth for the Danish artists was another form of reality, an imaginative vision materialized in the artwork as a more authentic truth, in line with their concept of a “new realism.” The turn to fantasy was less an escape than a new form of Marxist materialism, the emphasis on painterly...
materials themselves and their potential to express imaginative content that suggests alternative configurations of sensible reality.

Jorn’s mythmaking resists the classic function of mythologies to substantiate collective identities and reproduce them. Instead it focuses on the “mythopoetic,” imaginative ability of creating new ones. The open-ended nature of the fantastic imagery is evident in Jorn’s Helhesten period painting, such as the paintings Titania I-II of 1940–1941, the second version of which was more pictorially developed. In Jorn’s Titania II (Color Plate I), for example, unidentifiable beings proliferate by means of a meandering, seemingly automatic composition of lines like those in the Blue Picture.

Jorn has drawn out figures by adding small shapes reminiscent of eyes, teeth, and breasts, and created a reference to landscape through the use of vivid blue in the areas toward the top and rich browns and greens collecting toward the bottom. He neither creates recognizable beings, however, nor a believable space. Jorn introduces the possibility of mythic content primarily through the title of the work, which most likely arose in the process of painting, since Jorn determined titles mostly as an afterthought. Titania II exemplifies Jorn’s tendency in the 1940s to choose titles evoking mythic or fantastic stories, in this case a legend, made famous by Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, of the fairy queen ruling over an enchanted forest of fantastic beings. “Titania” was also the title of a poem by Swedish Symbolist poet Gustav Fröding (1860–1911). Jorn once said that Fröding was the author who meant most to him in his youth. Fröding’s “Titania” reads as follows:

A tune as from small violins—
Hark—through the hazel and birch go the rings.
The moonlit meadows are eerie bright,
The woods are as dark as the darkest night.
With floating and waving hair there goes
A dance on wild ethereal toes.
Ti ta! Ti ta! Ti ta!

Look, glimpses of gauze and of silk!
Look, bosoms and necks as white as milk,
Flitting and flying there light-footed goes
A whispering waltz on wingèd shoes.
Who’s swirling around in her airy ball
At the midnight hour in silvery hall?
Ti ta! Ti ta! Titania!

The poem provides a vivid background for the imaginary scene implied by the picture’s title. Its nonsense syllables of “ti ta” evoke Jorn’s own experimentation with mythopoetic titles, while its imagery of flitting fabric and white skin is aptly evoked in Jorn’s brightly-colored abstract shapes. In numerous works of the 1940s, including Titania II, Jorn depicts a fantastic festival scene in abstract visual language. In his writing of the late 1940s, Jorn repeatedly describes the importance of the festival as a communal celebration of the seasons. In Magic and the Fine Arts, he notes, “In a society the need of grown individuals for
play finds its highest expression in celebrations and holidays.” He creates a celebratory atmosphere through intense, undiluted colors and the depiction of a menagerie of semi-identifiable forms, simultaneously appearing and dissolving in the composition.

The composition presents a collection of small shapes morphing into playful figures and dissolving again. The figures appear lively because of their semi-abstraction and implicit transformation, as a series of half-formed shapes linked to each other. Atkins refers to this series of images from ca. 1940–1942 as the “Little Things” pictures, after Jorn’s title for one of the images, Småting. Although not a formal series, the “Little Things” pictures are characterized by all-over compositions and a notable undifferentiation or fluctuation of figure and ground; the first image in the series was the Blue Picture. Titania II is one of the most lively and evocative in the series. The picture is utterly flattened by Jorn’s reinforcing of the linear network through added brushstrokes and by the juxtaposition of flat shapes in alternating warm and cool colors. It shows a distinct confusion of figure and ground, with the compositional network of lines frequently overlapping or dissolving into brushwork. Its undulating visual rhythm leads the eye across the surface. Areas of thickly impastoed paint and feathery brushstrokes emphasize the picture’s physical presence. The colors obey no recognizable pattern other than a balanced distribution across the surface that provides a sensuous rhythm, a push–pull of warm and cool tones reminiscent of Miró. If the myth of Titania has a Nordic lineage, the imagery of mouths, teeth, and breasts comes straight out of abstract Surrealism, even if Jorn eschewed the Freudian psychosexual interpretation of it. While the biomorphic forms evoke Miró, nothing in the interaction of semi-abstract figures indicates any violence or aggression as typical in the Catalán painter’s work; the tone of childlike imagination evokes instead the playfulness of Klee. In the context of Helhesten’s romantic–primitivist interests, Jorn could have viewed the painting’s reference to multiple nude figures as a scene of natural sexuality or collective human existence. Titania II exemplifies Jorn’s particular combination of myth and materialism, evoking the fruitful tension between spontaneous abstract composition and the representation of a fantastic scene.

In works like this, the observer must imagine the mythic or fantastic content of the picture, with the title as a mere guide. In this way, Jorn emphasizes the role of fantasy in perception, so that the subject is not given as a creation in the mind of the artist but rather becomes a projection of the consciousness of the viewer. The only definable meaning of the picture is its invitation to imagine a scene of fantastic beings, the identity of which shifts across the picture surface and depends entirely on the viewer. In the creation of a world figurative enough to be considered mythic but not specific enough to provide narrative and thus illustrate a myth, the picture demands the active engagement of a subject able to change directions, intentions, opinions, and roles in a shifting response to the moment. It acknowledges at the same time that subject formation occurs in part through the perception of figurative imagery, through a complex process of identification, projection, rejection,
and self-recognition. The substitution of fantastic imagery for figures based on visual reality facilitates a more open-ended and self-determining process of identification. The mythic content itself symbolizes the openness of the dialogue between artist and viewer.

Often in Helhesten works, this content also takes the form of an imaginary landscape implying a context for multiple figures, symbolic of a social existence. The landscape emphasis makes Helhesten spontaneous abstraction distinct from the Surrealist attraction to single monstrous figures such as the Minotaur or paired sexual imagery as in mythic depictions of Pasiphaë. This imaginary landscape format would occupy Jorn throughout his career, in numerous images of imaginary outdoor scenes featuring a sun overhead, as in the round red form at the upper right of *Titania II* which doubles as the head of a small figure. He references the strong landscape tradition in Scandinavian art and the role of fantastic expression in Nordic modernism. The tradition of the landscape beneath a dominating sun had a strong lineage in Danish art, seen in expressionists like Jens Søndergaard and Olaf Rude, who were themselves influenced by Edvard Munch’s *Sun* paintings of 1911–1916. Unlike earlier Expressionist scenes of isolation, though, the populated landscapes of Helhesten evoke collective social life.

The significance of mythmaking in the 1940s related to the necessity of myth for the development of social narratives that define communities. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe propose a compelling theory of myth as an invented discourse of communal identity. The Helhesten artists believed the relationship of myth to community was foundational to human social life. Helhesten developed an approach that emphasized the visualization of mythic themes divorced from narrative and eschewing finish or complete representation. In their demand for an active experience of viewing necessary to decipher the images in formation on the canvas, the paintings are symbolic attempts to develop new imaginary identities, communities open to self-definition rather than predefined through existing myths associated with one culture or another.

Mythmaking for these artists manifests most directly in the combination of painterly spontaneity and the form of the mask, which appeared frequently in Helhesten paintings. Jorn depicted masks both as diminutive rhythmic forms like in *Titania II* and as larger, more recognizable masks, as in a haunting work from 1945 called simply *Mask* (Fig. 1.6). The colors of this unusually somber work from just after the Helhesten period seem to evoke the mood of the war’s final days (as opposed to the forced ebullience of most Helhesten works, a polemical diversion from the wartime mood). It demonstrates Jorn’s turn to increasingly painterly brushwork on a post-Cubist armature, and his debt to Egill Jacobsen’s exemplary Expressionist-style painterly abstraction called *Ophobning (Accumulation)* from 1938, a key work that heralded a new interest among the Danish artists in the vivid materiality of paint with its wet-on-wet accumulation of thick dripping lines of paint.
1.6 Asger Jorn, *Mask*, 1945. Oil on plywood, 81 × 64 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg
Jorn’s *Mask* also reflects his impression of the linear patterns in West African carvings and the vividly painted and carved eyes of Oceanic masks. The Helhesten artists had many opportunities to study such masks, at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and the Danish National Museum, both of which opened their ethnographic galleries in 1938. Under the Occupation in Copenhagen, the artists spent much time at the National Museum, where the Helhesten co-founder, anthropologist P.V. Glob, worked. They also visited the home of Carl Kjersmeier, a collector who allowed the artists weekly access to his large array of African sculptures. His collection included African art such as Kota reliquaries and Bambara antelope headdresses, which are transformed into flat colorful shapes in Jacobsen’s paintings, and Oceanic carving from New Guinea. The artists believed these masks and non-Western art in general expressed collective rather than individual meanings. Although this attitude was typical of modern primitivism, it did not, however, extend to racial assumptions about the peoples who created the masks; when Bille and Jorn reviewed the newly-opened Musée de l’Homme in Paris in 1938, they reported the comment of museum director Jacques Soustelle that “primitive” art “does not exist” and that the development of culture in ancient Mexican art equals anything in ancient Greece. Following modernist artistic precedents such as the formalist use of the mask in Picasso’s Cubism, they hit on a form that not only seemed related to the mythopoetic possibilities of modernist abstraction but also could be found in nearly every culture in the world, and was thus symbolic of collective cultural life.

The Danish artists conceived the mask as a universal symbolic form connecting fantastic and material worlds, individual perspective and social context. It was a form that bridged culturally specific symbolism and materialist abstraction. Egill Jacobsen first developed a series of “Mask” pictures in the mid-1930s, drawing on modernist precedents including Cubism, Surrealism, and Kandinsky (Fig. 1.7).

The Helhesten artists explained their interest in the form in the “New Realism” manifesto: “Primitive peoples [...] in order to express psychic experiences in dramatic form, [...] bring before the face a mask, which is something wholly different than a face. A totally new creature comes into being, neither animal nor human, created by the artist’s fantasy and in accord with human psychic needs.” The mask was a way of producing a symbolic abstract art with a multivarious content that invoked wide-ranging interpretation. Linien co-founder Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen developed a theory of “symbolic abstraction” in his book *Symbols in Abstract Art*, which was hugely influential on the Linien and Helhesten artists. Bjerke Petersen, who spent a year at the Dessau Bauhaus, introduced the idea of abstract symbolization in pictorial composition, relating many of Kandinsky’s ideas on composition detailed in *Point and Line to Plane*. Bjerke Petersen emphasized that a symbolic art successfully combined the cognitive understanding of science with the emotional effects of art. Jorn quotes Bjerke Petersen’s book in a 1955
The human ability to symbolize was a formal equivalent to the Helhesten view of mythmaking as a basic creative capability of individuals or groups. Egill Jacobsen wrote that the purpose of using the mask form was to provide “a starting point, a structure” for the development of these material relationships. Jacobsen’s masks combined elements of existing masks with Picassoid teeth, Viking ornament, and other sources to create purely fantastic images in decorative patterns, with no indication of plausible space. The mask’s purpose according to Jacobsen was “to express inner and outer experiences, and to free these experiences and pass them on. The eyes look inwards, trying to recognize something, and look outwards to unite it with its surroundings.”

The process of looking inwards suggests that the psyche is something unfamiliar that develops through the process of its depiction rather than existing to be externalized. Echoing Jacobsen, Jorn also described inspiration as something that comes simultaneously from inner and outer stimuli. Ole Sarvig observed at the time that the mask indicated a self-derisive irony, a humorous quality, in the new art. This ironic humor points to multiple levels of meaning. The complex, artificial, and symbolic form of the mask demands a greater interpretive investment on the part of the viewer.

Jorn wrote extensively in the 1940s on the importance of the symbol in response to Bjerke Petersen’s theory. He described the mythic symbol, the linguistic symbol, the artistic symbol, and the scientific symbol that expresses physical energy as equivalent. He sought abstract symbols that spoke directly and intuitively to people. Jorn claimed that art could now be conceived as a “direct symbolic language, namely an imaginary art without object.” For Jorn, art was a language of symbols with no direct referents, no distinct meanings other than the material interaction of forms. Jorn would later write in his “Danefæ” text of 1957 that, “to create an image means to create gods. Every image is a god.” Gods, in this case, were another type of symbol for a community. Jorn’s mask forms were more commonly associated with a starting point, a structure for the development of these material relationships.
with devils, their grotesque appearance resulting from their materialization out of abstraction itself, in a perpetual state of unfinish.

The concepts symbolized by the Helhesten mask forms were left deliberately open to interpretation, but they also related to their investigation of the specific uses of masks in non-Western societies. Both Linien and Helhesten published articles on the art of Africa, Greenland, prehistoric Scandinavia, and nomads in China, which included masks and abstracted animal images. An anthropologist’s article on shaman masks from Greenland describes the masks as images of “fertile fantasy” and “the great Unexplainable”; but the author, Gitz Johansen, concludes that the Greenlanders’ art is based on the wonders inherent in nature itself, such as the strange vision of a walrus head emerging like a giant’s head out of the glass mirror of the sea. Masks were appreciated, broadly speaking, for their association with creative fantasy and collective harmony with the natural world.

Nordic myth?

The scholarship on Jorn and Cobra abounds with clichés of the group’s obsession with Nordic myth.76 Their art referenced many different world art traditions, however, while their interest in Scandinavian themes was a strategic move to displace the Nazi usurpation of the Nordic heritage. In the 1940s, artists in both Europe and the U.S. viewed myth as a symbolic discourse of collectivity and democratic ideals of dissent, at a time when all political positions had been polarized. This broader context for the exploration of myth includes André Breton’s redefining Surrealism as the search for a “new myth” in New York in 1942; the increasing popularity of anthropological texts by scholars like Ruth Benedict or Lucien Lévy-Bruhl; the increased interest in philosophical explorations of myth such as that of Ernst Cassirer and the psychological writings of Carl Jung; the expanding study of comparative mythology by James Frazer and his successors Joseph Campbell, Georges Dumézil, and Mircea Eliade; and finally, investigations of the mythic structures of Western civilization itself by critical theorists like Adorno and Horkheimer, who propose in The Dialectic of Enlightenment that rationalism is the great myth of Enlightenment culture.77 Myth refers generally to narratives without a specified author that are passed down in specific cultural groups, whose content is conventionally defined as fantastic, but in fact may not be strictly separated in origin, substance or theme from other genres such as legend, folktales, fantasy, literature, allegory, ballads, sagas, or even dreams in psychoanalytic discourse.

Jorn wrote in the late 1940s that the word “myth” originally referred to verbal tales, and was used to support religious cults and ceremonies. Myths, he describes, could also be poetic works, hero tales, epics, drama, fairy tales, and legends associated secondarily with religious systems, as in medieval Christianity. Focusing on the links between contemporary life and historic
myths, he maintains that sport, theater, and circus activities all developed out of original cultic processions and rituals. Yet Jorn was less interested in rituals than in the transformation of mythic symbols over time in specific communities. His paintings imagined that transformation as a literal, unending process, drawing on masks and mythic imagery from all over the world.

Jorn’s interpretation of art as mythmaking (as opposed to belief in myth) built on the Romantic understanding of the concept. Unlike myth, which as a collection of conventional narratives may be considered alternately as entertainment, cultural education, or religious doctrine depending on the observer, mythmaking is a deliberate practice which attempts the impossible: the deliberate creation of new myths. The Danish concept of mythmaking was part of the legacy of Romanticism. The German Romantics Hölderlin, Hegel, and Schelling called for a “new mythology” in their manifesto of 1795, initiating the next two centuries’ investigations of the possibility of forging a modern identity through mythmaking. The concept of the “mythmaker,” which came into popular use throughout Europe by the turn of the twentieth century, juxtaposes paradoxically the Romantic ideal of the individual creator with the concept of myth itself, with its inherent connotations of anonymous, collective development and oral elaboration through the ages. In Denmark, the primary Romantic exponent of myth was the influential philosopher, religious and educational reformer N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872). One of Grundtvig’s key concepts was what he called the “Living Word,” the idea that every generation passes down its knowledge orally. This meant that rather than transmitting a cultural heritage, each generation actively reconstructs its knowledge for the next.

Grundtvig referred to the mythsmeden (“myth-forger”) in his writings, indicating that the narrators of myth inevitably reshape the stories as they tell them. His writings underscore the idea of mythmaking in the sense that each generation must recreate the content of its cultural myths in its own retellings.

Jorn was deeply familiar with the discussions of Nordic myth by Grundtvig and his numerous followers. Grundtvig published a series of books on Nordic sagas and myths that became renowned for their establishment of a Scandinavian cultural heritage autonomous from the rest of Europe. Initially a follower of Schelling, Grundtvig, too, rejected the eighteenth-century idea that myths were invented to explain natural phenomena. Grundtvig wrote that myths were living expressions of the cultures that created them, and advocated the retelling of Nordic myths in Copenhagen the way the Greek myths were orally retold in the Athens of his day. His books drew parallels between the Greek and Nordic gods and stories. He viewed subjective interpretation as the key to revitalizing these mythic tales, which held cultural and spiritual meanings to be unlocked by succeeding generations. For Grundtvig, “myth’s historical and living explanations” were vital to the education of youth. His 1832 Nordisk mytologi devotes as much space to Scandinavian nationalism as myth itself, inciting the Danish public to learn
the Old Norse of the medieval sagas instead of Latin and calling for a “Nordic Renaissance.” Jorn’s writings make reference to Grundtvig repeatedly. In the 1940s, he admires Grundtvig’s anti-classicism but critiques Grundtvig for lacking an internationalist focus; in the 1960s, he cites long quotations from Grundtvig’s mythological discussions which emphasize their Nordic cultural lineage. From Grundtvig, Jorn acquired his understanding of mythmaking as the creative transformation of existing stories.

Jorn’s interest in myth also drew on an increasing Danish exploration of Nordic myth and legend in scholarly investigations of the early twentieth century. He cites the mythographic writings of Johannes V. Jensen (1873–1950) and Thøger Larsen (1875–1928), among others. Larsen was known for his retranslation and analysis of the poetic Edda, the Viking-age writings that first recorded the Nordic myths. Jensen was a well-known novelist from Jutland, like Jorn, and exponent of a Nordic cultural revival around 1900 that he called the “Gothic renaissance.” Between 1907 and 1945 Jensen published nine volumes of a new philosophical short-story genre he invented and named Myter (Myths). His “myths” combined folktale, traditional myth, and fiction, redefining myth as something secular and related to artistic invention. As Peter Shield observes, his writings led to a new Danish definition of myth as “a poetic work that seeks in a flash to illuminate a condition in nature or the history of humanity.” Jorn’s inheritance of the Danish mythmaking tradition, then, combined elements of comparative mythology derived from Grundtvig and Larsen, with Jensen’s Nordic cultural pride and approach to myth as something that crosses genres, creatively refashioned with each retelling.

Although interest in myth had already developed in Surrealism and Linien, the Nazi presence led Helhesten to clarify its position on myth in opposition to that of Fascism. Jean-Paul Sartre observes, for example, that the “myth-maker” was a recognized social force, the passionate leader who compels people not through rational argument but through emotional appeal. Sartre writes: “The masses […] are in constant danger of going astray, […] of being seduced by the voice of the myth-maker, and because the artist has no language which permits them to hear him.” Sartre’s assertion (one of many similar statements from that time) is a reminder that myth became so central to art-making in the 1940s precisely because of this mythic dimension of politics, as the artists sought to reach audiences increasingly swayed by irrational ideologies.

The letter sent by the Helhesten artists to MoMA in 1946 proclaims that “the free experimental art rose to importance in opposition to the Nazi view of art.” Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe describe the poetics of myth in Nazism that the Danes opposed. They observe that because myth is one of the primary discourses of cultural identity, it became central to the Nazi promotion of German ethnic supremacy. They argue that Nazism took such a strong interest in myth precisely because Nazi politics was both a dramatization of irrational, emotional social bonds, and fundamentally based on a particularly German conception of racial identity that dated back to the nineteenth century.
Myth was increasingly important in the ideological struggle over the Nordic heritage, and therefore became a way for the Danish artists to assert an autonomous Scandinavian culture different from the German. The Viking revival by Nazi ideologues like Alfred Rosenberg, who actively promoted replacing Christianity with Nordic paganism, attempted to forge a link between Scandinavian mythology and Nazi theories of racial purity that were anathema to the Danish artists.⁹¹ The Nazis developed their own project of mythmaking, which Hitler described as “culture-creating” or “culture-founding.”⁹² Their propaganda made use of some of the same sources explored by the artists, of irrational drives and emotional connections with a greater cosmic unity, which the Nazis conceived as embodied in the Fascist state. The Nazi application of this emotional appeal into a totalitarian militaristic state differed vastly, however, from the artists’ attempts to unleash disorder as part of an ongoing social critique. The Helhesten viewpoint related fundamentally to dissent and freedom of expression. The *Helhesten* article “On Freedom” called for state support of artists to ensure that freedom of expression would be available to the many rather than the few, a democratic political vision.⁹³ The Nazi Party may have begun with mythmaking, but ended with a racial mythology, in a new authoritarian system of belief disseminated by means of powerful images and rituals, structures of fascination that shut down critical thought. It was this “myth-believing (myte-troende)” attitude which Lergaard and Jorn specifically rejected.

In their choice of the terror-inspiring Scandinavian Hell-horse as a totemic title, the Helhesten artists eschewed the romantic image of the rider so prominent in modernist images, including those of the Blue Rider group and the Danish Cubist–Expressionist Willem Scharff.⁹⁴ Although Scharff was not a Fascist supporter, Nazi art would systematically espouse such images of the heroic nude, classically modeled. According to Hitler, Nazi art would replace the “worthless, integrally unskilled products” of Expressionism with “worthy images expressing the life-course of our people.”⁹⁵ Fascist aesthetics revived neoclassical figural imagery, portraying the idealized tall, muscular, and blond physical types espoused by Nazi race theory as particularly “Nordic.” At this historical moment, the Helhesten group took up the symbol of the monstrous animal of Scandinavian legend, minus the heroic rider. Nevertheless, their source materials were also international; the horse was not merely a Scandinavian symbol but a player in many world myths. The need to reject the racial identity imposed by the Germans intensified their critique of both naturalistic and *nationalistic* figuration. In order to reject the Fascist model of the heroic figure they sought the visual and conceptual sources of figuration: the basic human ability to envision a figure for self-identification. Jorn’s art suggests an implicitly socially disruptive mythic content consisting of a menagerie of semi-formed monsters. The vehement avoidance of figuration and naturalism in Helhesten also meant a rejection of the concept of artistic models as social role models, which reached its destructive culminating in the racial types of Nazi art.⁹⁶ Although Helhesten envisioned figuration as a creative process, if the art was figural, it was monstrous rather than humanist.
Jorn’s art combined his own intimate familiarity with the Nordic cultural tradition with the active exploration of other mythic and folkloric traditions. Jorn’s large 1944 painting *Trolden og fuglene* (*The Troll and the Birds*, Color Plate 2) summarizes the culmination of Helhesten painterly mythmaking in a combination of gestural spontaneity and multicultural sources. The work represents a giant collective scene, with the large mask in the upper right apparently presiding. Colored areas do not follow the graphite lines of the sketched composition, but create their own seemingly spontaneous shapes. In the “New Realism” manifesto, the Helhesten painters emphasize that this “painterly spontaneity” arises through color: “Color becomes independent of drawing, which arranges itself after color’s demand for extension, a spontaneous sensation.”

Jorn created the composition by indeterminately arranging bits of automatic doodling with forms worked out in sketches and other works. Although the work’s process was less spontaneous than that of the *Blue Picture*, its painterly quality more aptly captures the appearance of spontaneity and thus better embodies the Helhesten interest in spontaneous mythmaking.

The white of the canvas as well as Jorn’s graphite sketch lines clearly show through in the finished painting, giving it a sense of incompleteness that in itself prevents the image from resolving into a balanced or complete composition. The vivid complementary colors create an active rhythm across the surface, in a manic sendup of Kandinsky’s theories of the emotional effects of individual colors, well studied by Jorn. The accumulation of simplistic forms painted quickly and without apparent academic skill, and the shapes colored in with straight brushstrokes that recall Picasso’s synthetic Cubist hatching as well as children’s coloring, disrupt artful composition as it was then understood. The garish colors, jagged brushwork, and seemingly haphazard composition transgressed the boundaries of taste and beauty in painting of the 1940s. In Denmark in particular, even Picasso was still too threatening in his Cubist disruption of form for the director of the Statens Museum for Kunst, who preferred the graceful classicism of Matisse. The *Troll and the Birds* is by contrast a big, awkward oaf of a picture, strident in its utter disregard for painterly skill and finish.

The large mask at upper right most likely led to the painting’s title. The troll was a menacing figure in Nordic mythology, ready to attack innocent heroes. Jorn makes it an anti-hero presiding over his Dionysian scene of festive communion in a constructed “natural” setting, as indicated by the small sun over the center and the treelike forms. The troll-mask is one of Jorn’s first manifestations in painting of the monstrous imagery that would come to dominate his work in the following decade. The other semi-abstract figures in *The Troll and the Birds* consist mostly of birdlike creatures, although a few resemble horses or wolves (as in the mask with a long brown “nose” midway across the upper left side). None of the “figures” can be removed from their painterly context intact; even the “troll” mask morphs into several other masks, with smaller forms developing out of it on the left side.
This metamorphosis demonstrates the spontaneous aspect of Jorn’s compositional technique, the development of motifs out of the linear design itself. While the “troll” mask draws on old Scandinavian stories as well as Jacobsen’s interest in the mask form, its shape makes direct reference to Oceanic figures Jorn had seen in the Danish National Museum collection. The scene implies a social context for the visual forms derived from non-Western and modernist art, with Jorn adapting these forms out of various cultural stories into a new image of his own creation.

Jorn’s picture is nearly mural scale, paradoxically replacing public political art with childlike themes writ large. It invites close viewing by means of visible brushwork that highlights the process of forms taking shape through color. In *The Troll and the Birds*, color and line are separated so that the process of coloring is emphasized, in a way directly reminiscent of the children’s art making Jorn describes in a 1947 text. Perhaps thinking of his own three children, he writes of the joy of painting, appreciation of color, and love of creative work evident in children when they are given a box of colored crayons and a piece of paper.30 Jorn became interested in children’s art through Le Corbusier, who had employed Jorn to enlarge some children’s drawings into murals for 1937 World’s Exposition in Paris, as well as the Blaue Reiter, Klee, and Miró.31 The girl figure at the lower left of the picture, defined by her triangular dress and square mask-head, reworks one of the small watercolors of the 1944 “Didaska” series of watercolors Jorn dedicated to his lover at the time, Elna Fonnesbech-Sandberg. The little girl motif and the fable-like subject relate to the modernist interest in children’s art as symbolic of uninhibited creativity. The year Jorn completed the painting, his daughter Susanne was born, and his son Klaus turned three. At the time, Jorn arranged for the Helhesten artists to paint murals inspired by children’s art in a local kindergarten (discussed in Chapter 2). Both *Helhesten* and, later, *Cobra* published lithographs of children’s art. As with earlier modernists, children’s art was for the Danish artists a mode of creation based on nothing but fantasy and imagination. At the same time, Jorn also wrote that abstract art was sophisticated and adult rather than childlike, because it attempts to paint “the image of pure thought.”32 Jorn consistently maintained that children’s artistic abilities surpassed those of adults in spontaneity and freedom from aesthetic constraint, but he did not believe that adults could simply return to a childlike mind. His *Troll* mural paradoxically monumentalizes the diminutive figures of children’s drawing, drawing on its spontaneity as a critique of finish, composition, taste, and beauty in modernist painting. It also renders homage to the avant-garde by quoting from one of the most political paintings in modern art, Picasso’s *Guernica*.

Overlaid with the little girl figure at lower left, Jorn includes an entire visual quotation from Picasso’s *Guernica*, a painting Jorn knew intimately since his friend Matta worked as a painting assistant on it in the Spanish pavilion of the same 1937 World’s Exposition where Jorn worked for Le Corbusier. Picasso’s famous composition is quoted in the skewed brown rectangle at lower left,
with its overseeing eye and the animal figures distributed in rough echoes of the foreground figures of *Guernica*, the two screaming women with baby replaced by the vivacious little girl, the dead male figure on the ground, and the running woman at right replaced with what resembles a distorted rooster. Picasso exemplified for the Helhesten artists both the ideal of prolific spontaneous creation in art and, in *Guernica*, an ideal of modernism as a political critique. Embedding it in his painting, Jorn referenced Picasso’s protest against an early Nazi atrocity as another veiled critique of the German occupiers, in a work whose deliberately awkward composition and garish colors openly embraced the Expressionist anti-classicism the Nazis labeled “degenerate.” Alongside Nordic myth, then, Jorn alludes to a wide range of sources from avant-garde painting to children’s art and non-Western form, turning up the pictorial volume in a garish festival scene that directly challenged the artistic culture of the Occupation.

Resisting a “new myth”

While Picasso and Kandinsky were the most important precedents for Helhesten’s exploration of painterly spontaneity, Surrealism was a primary inspiration for Jorn’s 1930s interest in the combination of automatism with mythic symbolism and ethnographic exploration. After the war, it became the ideological foil for Jorn’s ideas on myth, as he opposed his materialist approach to the idealism of postwar Bretonian Surrealism and the naturalistic style it supported. Jorn’s interest in myth had developed in the rich intellectual and artistic context of late 1930s Paris, when anthropology was developing as a field and artists and writers actively explored world myth and non-Western art. The Surrealists began exploring myth beginning with Breton’s Second Surrealist Manifesto of 1929, which called for a “profound and veritable occultation of Surrealism.” In the 1930s, mythological themes took precedence in Surrealist art. The Surrealist myths of Loplop and Gradiva developed from an active process of mythmaking by artists like Ernst and Masson. The group published accounts of Native American myths and exhibited objects from Africa and Oceania next to everyday objects in innovative exhibitions at Charles Ratton Gallery and other venues. The Linien artists made direct contact with several abstract, Dada and Surrealist artists including Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Kandinsky, Tanguy, Giacometti, and Ernst. In 1937, Jacobsen and Bille bought Ernst’s painting *Bonjour, Satanas* for a Danish collector. The picture features a group of birdlike fantastic figures in opaque, vividly colored shapes, with a thick impasto that would later become characteristic of Helhesten.

In the postwar period, however, the Revolutionary Surrealist and Cobra groups formed as a specific critique of the perceived mysticism and removal from politics of postwar Surrealism, and Jorn disagreed profoundly with the terms of Breton’s call for a “New Myth.” Breton proclaimed the need for
a new myth as early as 1937, and began to systematically explore it in the early 1940s. Soon other Surrealists in exile began to question the relevance of Breton’s concept for contemporary society, because of its appropriation of prophets and religious rites. Undeterred, Breton reiterated his call for a “New Myth” in 1947, in the catalog essay for the International Surrealist Exhibition at Galerie Maeght. The exhibition was designed as an initiation rite, with a series of “ordeals” facing the spectator on various levels, including a labyrinth containing 12 altars with objects relating to vodou, tarot, games, and magic. Breton elaborates in the text “Surrealist Comet” that his New Myth means the perfect union of poetry and art, but also that it must be accompanied by an attitude of “enlightened doubt.” Breton’s writing attempted to keep the concept of a New Myth open, but his emphasis on ritualization and cultic symbols made it appear a conventional, if esoteric, mythology, and thus the antithesis of mythmaking. The Revolutionary Surrealists in Paris—who had come together to critique Surrealism’s divorce from materialist politics and included Jorn’s friends Noël Arnaud, Christian Dotremont, and Édouard Jaguer—protested outside the gallery and delivered a pamphlet against the exhibition.

Jorn criticized Breton’s call to change myth without changing the material aspects of life. Jorn defines myth as the “explanation and figuration by means of which humans make an event out of lived experiences.” Humankind, he continues, must live in an “active state of mythic creation,” specifying that this is the “materialist” point of view toward myth. He opposes his own materialist view that myth develops out of life to the “metaphysical” view that it is myth, or thought, which creates life. Jorn argues that the resulting mythologies, while not false, arise out of specific lived conditions and must remain static and fixed in order to ensure a religious order. The task of artists is to oppose the metaphysical / religious conception of myths, and move from the passive state of belief to the active state of mythic creation.

In contrast to Breton, the concept of ritual was not a key aspect of Jorn’s idea of myth. Jorn considered mythmaking a basic element of human imagination and creative potential available to all, and emphasized its availability in the cultural forms of popular kitsch and folk tales. Jorn specified that he was not interested in rites as exclusive, secret, or mysterious, but rather the opposite. He wrote in Magic and the Fine Arts, a text from ca. 1948, that rituals created community among people of all societies. He explained people’s everyday rituals of greeting, citing the Chinese tradition of bowing as well as the Western hat-tipping described by Erwin Panofsky in Meaning in the Visual Arts. The “rituals” that interested Jorn were banal and inclusive, rather than esoteric. He focused instead on the imaginary, meaning mythic or fantastic, content of artworks, a content which could never be separated from abstract art’s material form.

Jorn’s interest in myth related to its possibilities for expressing anonymous, collective creativity rather than esoteric symbols or ritual. He took issue with Breton’s concept of a New Myth for what he perceived as its implication of
designating a single mythology (“a new myth”) and for the French poet’s dogmatic approach to promoting it (even if Breton may have in fact intended an embrace of the creative possibilities of the fantastic that in some ways related to Jorn’s). Breton’s practice of mythmaking involved retellings of his personal canon of mythology and mysticism, as in his wartime book Arcanum 17, a defense of esoteric philosophy in which Breton muses on Percé Rock in Québec through the imaginative lens of Mélusine, Osiris, and other pre-established myths. The approach to myth in Surrealist gatherings tended toward ritual and esoterism, with Breton presiding imperiously over admissions and salon games. The difference between Breton’s New Myth and Jorn’s mythmaking lay not just in their approach to myth as elitist and metaphysical versus populist and physical, but also in their different understandings of art. Breton never changed his view of art as a window onto the imaginary, personally favoring the stylistic naturalism that led Jorn, for his part, to reject later Surrealist works. Jorn and the Danish artists explicitly critiqued Ernst and Dalí for their “psychophotographic art.” Jorn’s spontaneous mythmaking was not a return to old narratives or traditional ideas of artistic representation, but rather an embrace of humanity’s fundamental ability to make sense of the world (or create new ones) through the creation of symbolic form. He developed this approach in the collective context of Helhesten with its explicit rejection of Nazism, and would turn it into an international movement with the development of Cobra after the war.

Notes


7. Ibid. Both the letter to the MoMA and the manifesto are translated in Hovdenakk, Egill Jacobson, 65–72.

9. Asger Jorn, “Asger Jorn om sig selv,” Kunst 1, no. 1 (1953), 9. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.


14. See, for example, Ejler Bille, Forskellige Figurer, Komposition I, 1941. Oil on canvas. 90 × 90 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg.


23. Jorn himself asserted in 1947 that the old progression of styles known as “isms” was now over. He included Expressionism in the list of past artistic styles, from Realism to Cubism and Surrealism, that were now outdated. Jorn, “Blade af kunstens bog,” vol. 2, n.p.


25. He expresses this viewpoint in a number of articles from the 1940s, including Asger Jorn, “Apollon eller Dionysos,” Byggmnästaren [Stockholm] 26, no. 17 (1947); and Jorn, “Blade af kunstens bog.”


38. The topic of graphology and its potential social applications were covered in the Danish popular press, for example Karl Hegnby, “Håndskrift og personlighedsbedømmelse,” *Psykologien og erhvervelivet* 6 (1949), 116–23.


41. Ibid., 147.


44. Ejler Bille, *Abstrakt kunst. vilhelm bjerke petersen. ejler bille* (Copenhagen: Christian Larsen Gallery, 1933); Bille, “Om nutidens grundlag for en skabende kunst.”
45. He writes, for example, “the artist is the hand which, by playing on this or that key (i.e., form), affects the human soul in this or that way.” Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 29.


54. Shakespeare comes to mind not only because of Jorn’s repeated references to Hamlet, a common trope of Danish identity, but also a drawing Jorn did in 1942 entitled *Macbeth*. The drawing, similar in composition to the “Little Things” paintings, is reproduced in Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994), vol. 1, 92.


58. Asger Jorn, *Småting*, 1940. Oil on canvas. 85.3 × 100 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg.

59. Jorn’s landscape *Untitled*, 1946 (Museum Jorn) bears a resemblance to the dominant sun in the Rude painting *Solen*, which Jorn could have seen when Elna Fonnesbech-Sandburg put it up for auction. See Elna Fonnesbech Sandberg, *Dem jeg mødte* (Copenhagen: Carit Andersen, 1945), 5.


64. Bille, “Nyaabnet afdeling af gammel amerikansk kunst i ’menneskets museum’” 117.


70. Asger Jorn, interviewed by Verner Hansen, “Man kan få kvalme af at se på et billede,” Nationaltidende, September 27, 1953, 8.


75. Gitz Johansen, “Østgrønlandske aandemanermasker,” Helhesten 1, no. 3 (1941), 77.


77. An excellent summary and bibliography of this history of mythography in the twentieth century, which argues for the continuing relevance of myth in contemporary culture, is William G. Doty, Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals, 2nd ed. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2000).


83. Ibid., 51.


96. The Nazi emphasis on race made the idea of heroic role models in art central. See the discussion of the new Nordic ideal of beauty in Rosenberg, *Race and Race History*, 129–56.
Numerous tales and literary descriptions of trolls exist in the Scandinavian tradition. Examples include the Danish folk tales collected in books Jorn owned, such as Hans Ellekilde, *Vore Danske folkeæventyr* (Copenhagen: Det Schønbergske Forlag, 1928). Gustaf Fröding wrote several poems about trolls told from a sympathetic perspective. See Fröding, *The Selected Poems of Gustaf Fröding*, 87–88, 111–12.


103. Peter Shield, “The War Horses: The Danish Reaction to *Guernica*,” 12–27.


105. Max Ernst, *Bonjour, Satanas*, 1928. Oil on canvas. 92.4 × 73.6 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg.

106. André Breton, “The Legendary Life of Max Ernst Preceded by a Brief Discussion of the Need for a New Myth,” *View* 7 (1942).


112. Ibid., 55–56. See also the critique in Jorn, “Discours aux Pingouins,” 8.


Communal expressions

“We are interested in the walls, not to position decorations, but to spread beyond the limits that the frame sets out for us.” So declared Asger Jorn in the midst of the war and Occupation, expressing his belief in the necessity that painting engage directly with architecture. Jorn praised the wall murals painted in Oslo by Norwegian artists Alf Rolfsen and Per Krogh in a text in the Danish architectural students’ journal A5, writing that Rolfsen used color and line to “explode the architecture so that it looked as if it could all fall apart if one poked the wall with a finger,” while Krogh “smash[ed] a building by painting a figure across and through walls and windows and the whole thing.”

He wanted to dissolve the wall symbolically in personal expression—but not in order to replace the social with purely individual desires. Rather, Jorn was interested in a social aesthetic that broke down the dichotomies of personal and communal, private and public, expression and rationalism by upholding the former terms as a sort of dialectical subversion of the latter. His ideas recalled Art Nouveau and Jugendstil interests in creating an organic, personal space to counter the oppressive and alienating aspects of public society. They also were a direct reaction against the modernist projects he worked on with Léger and Le Corbusier, and the dominance in 1940s Denmark of Functionalism, meaning a modern architecture based on the idea that form should be determined primarily by function and resist ornamentation. Although Scandinavian modern architecture is generally known for a more harmonious combination of organic and Functionalist elements, Jorn still found its resistance to decoration and spontaneity stifling and inhuman.

At a kindergarten in Copenhagen in 1944 and a student house at Bregnerød in 1949, Jorn and his colleagues in Helhesten and Cobra experimented with wall decorations that inserted images of folk playfulness, spontaneity, and monumental gestural drawing onto the walls. Both projects were based not on individual expression, but a sort of “singular–collective” creation in which each artist contributed a unique part of the project, a wall or a ceiling panel, in imagery that manifested subjectivity as both personal and shaped by the group. In 1952, Jorn revisited these ideas in paintings he made for the local
library branch where he grew up in Silkeborg, this time working alone but in unspoken dialogue with mythic imagery from around the world, producing a series of images he called “The Silent Myth.” Together, these projects exemplify Jorn’s significant role in developing a new approach to architectural decoration that paradoxically allied spontaneity with preexisting symbols, personal expression with collective effort, imagination with decoration, ancient imagery and modern interpretations. What I consider Jorn’s singular–collective expression in these projects relates directly to contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s theory of the “singular voice,” which only comes into being through dialogue with a wider collectivity.

Nancy conceptualizes the “singular voice” as a position of subjectivity that only becomes legible through its dialogue with others. Nancy’s theory of the “inoperative community” proposes a relationship of the subject to the community that rejects society’s predominant emphasis on the “operational,” meaning the techno-economic organization of our world that has superseded the communitarian organization once theorized by communism. This notion of community is more about spontaneity and potential than a society organized around the cycles of production and consumption. Nancy replaces the traditional term “individual,” which signifies the dissolution of community in the modern era of alienation, with a conception of the “singular” voice. Where individual implies a false distinction between inner and outer and denies the mobility of subject positions permeated by the external world, the singular voice is constantly creating itself in relation to others. Nancy describes the subject as a singularity that co-appears or “compears” simultaneously with the idea of community, and is inseparable from it. The self thus becomes not an internal subject opposed to external reality, but a singular intentional entity in constant dialogue or conflict with other singularities and with the environment, which shapes its very being. Nancy terms this condition the “singular plural.” This new terminology is crucial for understanding Jorn’s particular combination of collectivism and personal expression, for it describes their mutual inseparability. It also complicates the standard idea that expression is about individualism, a notion strongly embedded within the history of modernism and Abstract Expressionism.

For Jorn, the artwork is a link in the social network rather than an alienated object. From his earliest days as a Communist youth organizer, Jorn actively sought collective contexts to develop artistic experiments in relationship to others. His actions deliberately challenged the notion of creativity as an individual heritage. His attempts at collective artistic production depended on the singularity of contributions from individual participants, but at the same time deliberately challenged the notion that creativity means individual talent by basing his experiments directly on earlier avant-garde models of collectivity. His collaborative efforts included the artistic journals he worked on throughout his life, poetry books like the 1937 *Pigen i ilden* (*The Girl in the Fire*) with a text by Génia Katz Rajchmann and illustrations by Jorn, the word-paintings made with Dotremont and other Cobra artists, collaborative
tapestries made with Wemaëre and a group of weavers from 1948 to 1959, the book collaborations *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires* made with Guy Debord in 1957–1958, his book projects with his brother Jørgen Nøsh from *Salvi Dykeo* in 1945 to *Stavrim, Sonetter* in 1961, and his numerous anthropological book projects with contributing specialist authors for the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism in the 1960s. Jorn produced collaborative paintings with the Cobra artists in 1949, with Yves Klein, Ralph Rumney, and Maurice Wyckaert in 1956, with the Situationists, Jacqueline de Jong, and Gruppe SPUR in the early 1960s, and later on with Dotremont, Alechinsky, and Walasse Ting. Alongside those private projects, Jorn collaborated on mural paintings throughout his career. The striking importance in Jorn’s practice of collaborative dialogue with not only a community of artists but also a broader public is foregrounded uniquely in the collective murals from 1944 and 1949. These projects exemplify Jorn’s particular ideal of singular expression accomplished in a collective context, as well as his interest in integrating art and architecture into both a demonstration and an expression of the concept of “living art,” an art able to evolve along with the broader culture.

Jorn’s interest in connecting modern painting and architecture stemmed from his experience working with Léger and Le Corbusier on two explicitly socialist mural projects of the 1930s. These projects for the 1937 World Exposition in Paris included Léger’s *Le transport des forces* mural and the enlargement of children’s drawings to mural scale for Le Corbusier’s *Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux*, an ephemeral tent structure that illustrated the architect’s ideals of urbanism as a harmonious unity of the organic and the rational. Léger’s mural composition, a monumental depiction of a hydroelectric plant for the entrance to the science pavilion, presented machine forms and energetic flows leading harmoniously and clearly into one another in a Purist vision of Cubism. Jorn’s 1944 article “Ansigt til Ansigt” (Face to Face), where he takes stock of his experiences with Léger and Le Corbusier, critiques what he calls the “lamentable panoply of wall painting” in the expo as a whole, where painters were only commissioned to copy predesigned scenes among an array of mostly photographic and technical images. Jorn argues that the architectural decorations of Léger, Ozenfant, Mondrian, Taeuber-Arp, Lipchitz, and others “have allowed their paintings to become an adjunct of Functionalism’s architectural language of form—a rationalist approach to the visual arts.” Although the more poetic work of Le Corbusier was not truly Functionalist, Jorn was consciously working against the approaches made popular in Denmark by architects like Kay Fisker, C.F. Møller, and Poul Henningsen, who called themselves Functionalists at the time. Jorn believed that the Functionalist emphasis on social planning and restraint completely stifled human spontaneity, subordinating creativity to rational control. In fact, Jorn did not take into account Léger’s own critique of Functionalism in the “Nine Points on Monumentality” manifesto published with José Louis Sert and Sigfried Giedion during the war. One of the first major critiques of Functionalism, the manifesto called for an “integrated” relationship between
art, architecture, and urbanism that embraced subjective, even spiritual content, but still related to ideals of monumentality and collective glorification. This statement recognized human emotional needs in architecture, but also called explicitly for public monuments that expressed a totally unified collective experience, something Jorn’s theory did not uphold. The submission of line and color to the subdued geometric context of modernist architecture allowed the murals of Léger and Le Corbusier to function harmoniously, but it did not support the unpredictable expressive elements that Jorn and his colleagues believed were fundamental to human creativity. Beyond merely allowing for some limited incorporation of symbolic form and expressive elements, Jorn’s critique of Functionalism aimed to radically displace the emphasis on rational planning in favor of an organic spontaneity.

Jorn’s experiences in Paris galvanized him to try his hand at other collaborative mural projects, mostly in private contexts. He created a mural with Pierre Wemaëre in Wemaëre’s studio in Versailles in 1938, and painted large figures on the side of a bathing hut owned by Martin Kaalund-Jørgensen in Refsnæs, Denmark, in 1940. He did murals of the seasons on masonite blackout panels for Marinus Andersen’s apartment in Copenhagen in 1942 and made wall paintings and cement reliefs for Elna Fonnesbech-Sandberg’s house in Tibirke in 1944. The murals and wall reliefs of sphinxes and other creatures Max Ernst produced for the house he shared with Leonora Carrington in Saint-Martin d’Ardeche, which Jorn illustrated alongside a view of Gaudí’s Casa Milà in a 1943 article called “On the Artistic Potential Inherent Within Architecture,” likely inspired these. Jorn explains, in terms reminiscent of Surrealism, “We are interested in walls, murals, not in order to place decorations but to go beyond the limits of the picture frame, to where our desires lead us.” Murals, then, were for Jorn another way of discounting the importance of the object, emphasizing the passionate experience instead, in the tradition of Surrealism. The emphasis on murals in the 1940s related painting to the material presence of the body in space, and uniquely emphasized the provisional rather than monumental. Jorn’s wall murals paradoxically pushed the monumental format of architectural decoration toward the spontaneous and the expressive.

Several of Jorn’s close friends from the Helhesten period were architects, including Robert Dahlmann Olsen and Marinus Andersen. Jorn collaborated with Andersen on architectural designs incorporating abstract mosaics for a wine merchant named Rasch in 1942 (Fig. 2.1). Unfortunately, the project was never realized. It was one of Jorn’s only opportunities to work together with an architect to develop a harmonious dialogue between art and architecture at the planning stage, something that he would later lament was never allowed to artists. The plans suggest an innovative combination of geometric elements with abstract colored and wooden panels next to Jorn’s spontaneous-abstract paintings set directly into the walls at different heights. Beyond that, the aesthetic impact of the space can only be imagined.
Jorn also read and reviewed significant writings on modern and historical architecture, above all a book by Erik Lundberg, *Arkitekturs Formspråk* (*The Formal Language of Architecture*), which focused on biological and decorative forms recurrent in architecture throughout history. Jorn argued in a series of texts from the 1940s for architects to embrace collaboration with abstract artists in a new “organic” manner that rejected the impersonality of Functionalism. Jorn maintains that collaboration between artists and architects would result in the “natural” expression of people’s desires in unified decorated environments, as exemplified in the Polynesian decorated longhouse he illustrates in “Face to Face.” According to his caption for this image:

Natural peoples’ unproblematic straightforwardness in their desire for a natural artistic expansion is for us today reduced to the few dirty *pissoir* walls that are still technically usable for that purpose. Children in any case still have the ability, chased away like pests, to take chalk in the springtime and bless dead cement walls and asphalt with their life-giving language.

The organic dialogue between art and architecture Jorn sought would return human culture to what he perceived in the South Pacific context as a more fundamental harmony of expression and decoration, instead of the meager decorative options available to contemporary people in graffiti (a medium he would in fact later celebrate as a unique form of outsider expression). While these comments may be primitivist, they do not stereotype the South Pacific people racially or culturally; they merely suggest aspects
of creative expression that are missing in Western architecture in the era of Functionalism. He allied the organic unity of South Pacific designs to that of Jugendstil projects, and found a contemporary site to explore these ideas in the kindergarten project.

The kindergarten murals

The Helhesten murals at Sophus Baggers Børnehave (Sophus Baggers Kindergarten, now called Børnehuset Hjortøgade) in the Østerbro quarter of Copenhagen were the first collaborative project to fully embody Jorn’s goals of collective work, joy of creation, and a festive atmosphere in both the painting process and the scene of representation. At the time Jorn’s friend, an innovative psychologist named Jens Sigsgaard who had worked with several of the Helhesten artists as a Freudian analyst, ran the kindergarten. It exemplified the latest ideas of educational reform in Denmark. Jorn suggested the project out of what Kirsten Gad describes as his “distress” at the bare walls of the kindergarten, where his son was enrolled at the time. He rallied his Helhesten colleagues to the project, and Jorn, Pedersen, Alfelt, Bille, Jacobsen, and Heerup all participated in decorating it while the children were in school. Each artist painted a room, using the same tempera paints the children used. The resulting images decorate the architecture in a semi-autonomous frieze-like area a few feet below the ceiling (Fig. 2.2).

The wall paintings are done in childlike styles that present a unified ensemble, but one that preserves the differences apparent in each artist’s hand. The murals forego Jugendstil’s interest in the beauty of a flowing organic line in favor of a modernist expressive abstraction to link each artist’s section to the others. They still mobilize the organic as a critique of rationalism and the industrialization of society, but through the spontaneous movement of the artist’s hand rather than the mimicry of natural forms. The presentation of apparently natural, simplified gestures defies the controlled lines of Functionalism. The combination of these gestures with figural imagery in the form of trees, mothers, children, elves, and animals also rejects the modernist language of purity in favor of cultural symbols surely related to traditional (or kitsch) Scandinavian motifs and specifically the holiday season in which they were painted, in December 1944. The focus on fantastic landscapes and childlike images combined with bright, joyful (if badly faded) colors, unites the different artists’ works at Hjortøgade even as singular stylistic approaches remain clearly discernible.

The confining of those images and gestures to preexisting spaces arguably enforces the sort of limit between decoration and architecture that Jorn wanted to break down. The architecture, a minimally-decorated early twentieth-century brick building typical of the Østerbro neighborhood, preexisted the murals, precluding any possibility of developing the spaces in dialogue with artists at the design stage. The interior spaces now feature dropped ceilings,
fluorescent lights, and assorted bookcases and mundane storage structures along the walls. In the murals, the curvilinear and organic shapes of the painterly forms emphatically reject the regularity of the architecture and furnishings. The complete avoidance of rectilinear geometric forms in the imagery refuses all formal dialogue with the architectural setting, maintaining an artistic autonomy that implicitly critiques the space. However, at the same time it radically changes the mood of the space by dissolving the rectilinear form into abstract visual rhythms, punctuated by playful characters that bring life to an otherwise bland environment.

The spontaneity of this mural tied it to the broad category of children’s art in a radically different way than Jorn’s enlargement of drawings by a 12-year-old child in the 1937 Le Corbusier project. Jorn considered the schematic enlargements, one of a city street full of cars and buses, the other a harvest scene, to be second-rate images that sacrificed spontaneity in order to achieve harmony with the architectural whole. Rather than create forms united in a single stylistic unity as in Le Corbusier’s project, the Helhesten artists painted each room of the kindergarten in distinct painterly idioms. Pedersen’s and Heerup’s murals are less abstract than Jorn’s. Pedersen’s driving, featherlike brushstrokes markedly differ from Jorn’s and his fantastic animals and figures seem more finished and one-dimensional. In Jorn’s murals, the popular images remain suggested and semi-abstract.

The very kitschiness and simplicity of motifs like windmills, elves, or fir trees make them appear unpremeditated and spontaneous. They were a kind of automatic imagery for the artists that represented community and tradition rather than sexuality and classical myth as in Surrealist automatism. They saw folk images as popular symbols developed anonymously and collectively in the Scandinavian tradition. The motifs might at first seem “kitschy” in light of the commercialization of culture and particularly Christmas, but the figures of fir trees and elves are centuries-old Scandinavian images. Jorn’s murals also feature modernist forms recalling Klee and Miró. The hatched brushstrokes Jorn used relate to Picasso’s Cubist hatching from the 1920s. Yet the modernist abstractions turn before our eyes into new figures. Jorn’s hybrid forms such as tree- and bat-people are much more abstract than, for example, the elf and butterfly painted by Heerup, which are all that remain today of his larger mural.

The obviousness of the Helhesten motifs may be reminiscent of children’s art, but the relatively balanced rhythm of colors, decorative curving lines, references to modernist painting, and the equal distribution of the forms over
the expanse of the wall suggest a sophisticated language of abstraction. Jorn’s color application relates to the lines of the drawing with much more precision than young children’s art. According to Richard Winther, the children were actually unhappy with the works, confused by Pedersen’s horses with two heads and other figures they could not make out. Nor can the quickly painted and deliberately incomplete appearance of each form be simply reduced to the poor quality of paint or preservation; the figures themselves appear radically unfinished. Jorn’s work insists on the attribution of figural qualities to shapes that remain on the verge of flat abstraction. Surrealist precedents exist for this creation of figures out of abstraction, in Tanguy’s creature-like rocks or Ernst’s “Loplop” figures. But unlike those works, the Helhesten murals emphasize quick strokes of painterly color reminiscent of Expressionist painting, allowing the ground to show through and thus foregrounding their two-dimensional artifice. In the end, these experiments fuse modernist methods into a new form of primitivism where gestural abstraction meets children’s art and popular imagery.

The murals exemplify Jorn’s interest in the joy of creation, unskilled painting that rejects artful composition and finish, and the festive atmosphere of both the painting process and the resulting scene, all ideas he viewed as inherent in children’s creativity before they are trained in adult artistic methods. The group stated (in a prospectus for a never-realized project at another school) that its purpose in producing murals was to support the children’s propensity for playful creativity:

This project came out of a true joy for colors and forms and the completely free fantasy of the imagination. In our experience this dreaming, playful quality is one of the most meaningful assets of the child. […] In an age in which the rational demands on children and adults are so overwhelming and dominant, our pedagogical effort aims to support and nourish this enormously valuable side of the child’s spirit by creating an environment where this ability to fantasize and feel can grow and blossom.

The murals were the Helhesten artists’ attempt to monumentalize, in the sense of celebrating and making more visible, an ephemeral and innocent creativity. Yet the murals reject traditional monumentality’s functions of stabilizing, petrifying, elevating the subject, and impressing the viewer on behalf of a structure of power. The kindergarten murals at Hjortøgade Børnehuset are still surrounded by the daily activities of children and teachers. Although they are partially painted over and peeling, the frolicking figures on the walls above these spaces of learning and play suggest that the potential of imagination to transform tradition remains vibrant. In a social democracy like Denmark, they also proudly signify the important role of public institutions in making space for free creative expression.

The works are a tribute to free creativity at a moment when the artists perceived it to be under threat. They believed this childlike creativity to be pre-cultural and universal, but not universally accessible. What seems on the surface like a rather romantic, individualist, and humanist understanding of creativity as pure, unbridled expression was in fact actively political.
and critical, a polemical claim for spontaneity in a particular social context. It exemplifies not the isolated individual but the singular–plural of expression productively fostered within a community. The murals responded critically to several simultaneous social situations perceived as oppressive to free creativity: the politics of Fascism, the realities of war, the economics of capitalism, and the rationalist aesthetics of Purism and Functionalism as exemplified by prominent designers like Le Corbusier in France and Poul Henningsen in Denmark. Jorn writes in 1947: “with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the whole of bourgeois humanism, objective, free-thinking humanism, crashed down to earth with one blow. Objective humanism, or rather inhuman humanism, had gone bankrupt, and with it the objective or inhuman aesthetic, which formed the basis of Cubism and Functionalism.”

For Jorn, humanism was an individualist philosophy that depended on rational objectivity, explicitly allied to modernist art and design that rejected the organic in favor of a synthetic, rectilinear geometry. He himself had learned its principles under the artist who coined the term “machine aesthetic,” Léger, and he spent the rest of his career struggling to counter it.

The utopian, childlike creativity Helhesten supported was defined in deliberate opposition to the demands of rationalism or, as Horkheimer and Adorno described around the same time, “technological reason” that tends to abolish all spontaneous and useless activity in capitalist society. The artists considered children’s art and children’s play to embody a critical challenge to the dominance of instrumental reason in adult life. For critics like those of the Frankfurt School, the war was the culmination of Western culture’s embrace of rationalism and technocracy to the point of rationalizing the unprecedented destruction of human life. Nazi culture specifically raised instrumental reason (which Horkheimer and Adorno consider a betrayal of true reason) to a new level of cruelty precisely through the repression of the childlike, the disruptive, the marginal, and the spontaneous, all of which threatened the Fascist unity.

In various texts, Jorn attacked the “corporate thought” and organized social structures in Fascism and Soviet Communism as a specific threat to true collective human existence. These historical conditions form the background for Jorn’s emphasis on the childlike during and after the war. The kindergarten murals, however, render homage to the art of the young child in a unique way. In a site already dedicated under Sigsgaard’s leadership to a contemporary understanding of children’s experience, they engage in a multivalent dialogue with aspects of creativity associated with children—innocence, spontaneity, festive cultural symbols, and a spirit of play. All these elements of creativity would become hallmarks of the postwar Cobra movement as well.

A new beginning

Intense activity followed the Liberation in 1945, including the formation of several different avant-garde groups within the space of a few years, literally to make up for lost time. Jorn was particularly eager to see what artists in
other countries had accomplished during the war. He traveled around Scandinavia, visiting an Edvard Munch retrospective in Oslo that would have a profound impact on his work, and making contact in Malmö with the Swedish Imaginisterna (“Imaginist”) artists Anders Österlin and Carl Otto Hultén before returning to Paris. Jorn changed his given name from Jørgensen to Jorn in 1946, most likely to make his name internationally pronounceable on the eve of his return to Paris; Le Corbusier had referred to his assistant as simply “le peintre Asgaer.” Jorn met Constant at the Pierre Loeb Gallery in fall 1946, as the Dutch artist was examining some Miró paintings in storage. In the same year, Jorn met René Renne and Claude Serbanne, editors of Cahiers du Sud, with whom he made plans to publish a new international art journal (never realized, but the foundation for Cobra). He also met Pablo Picasso, André Breton, Wifredo Lam, Jean-Michel Atlan, and the young critic Michel Ragon, soon to become the major proponent of Cobra in France. Breton, somewhat mystified by Jorn’s rambling theories, disregarded his account of the Danish fusion of Surrealism and abstract art in Helhesten and accused Jorn of “Swedenborgism,” ironic since Jorn had no interest in mysticism.

An Untitled drawing of 1946 indicates the radical change Jorn’s work had undergone over the course of the war and Helhesten (Fig. 2.3). Its loose, gestural forms, developed spontaneously in a manner inspired by automatic drawing and partially developed to evoke playful, monstrous figures, are overlaid with vividly-colored, childlike scribbling in oil stick that directly contradicts the overt virtuosity of the calligraphic ink lines. This drawing demonstrates a new degree of gestural spontaneity. Jorn had developed a unique fusion of his early artistic influences: the faux-naïveté of Klee, the hatched planes and bodily distortions of Picasso, the feathery brushwork of Kandinsky, the symbolic abstractions of Ernst, and the menacing biomorphism of Miró, all in a fluid gestural style that rejected the purity of total abstraction. Jorn’s work remained a deliberately heterogeneous mix of spontaneous imagery appearing in gestural and material play and derived from both artistic and popular sources. He soon began forging alliances within his new artistic circle, many of whom had come to the same aesthetic conclusions in painting, while sharing Jorn’s view that painting was only one facet of a broader creative life.

In 1947, Jorn and Constant joined Belgian poets Christian Dotremont and Noël Arnaud along with other French and Belgian artists in the Revolutionary Surrealist group. Echoing Constant’s “Dutch Experimental Group,” Jorn represented the Danes as the “Danish Experimental Group” (a title made up on the spot) with a manifesto in the first Bulletin international du Surréalisme Révolutionnaire. In it, Jorn embraced Constant’s term “experimental” for his own concept of art as a process of seeking the unknown consciously modeled on scientific investigation. The Revolutionary Surrealist Group, developing out of the Resistance activities of Arnaud, Dotremont, critic Edouard Jaguer, and their circle in Paris and Brussels, foregrounded its support of the...
Communist Party and critiqued Surrealism as metaphysical and aesthetically traditionalist. Jorn argued that Breton’s movement was losing its avant-garde status for promoting art marked too much by idealism, literary interests, and the literal representation of dreams. Back in Denmark, Jorn rallied the Danish artists for international involvement during summer vacation on the island of Hjarnø in August 1948, coauthoring the so-called Hjarnø Declaration with the Helhesten group. This manifesto called for a “new artistic experience,” moving beyond both Surrealism and geometric abstraction, and announced an international journal to be published in French. Only some of the Danish artists, however, would become involved with what finally materialized from these various plans and projects: Cobra.

Cobra was founded in November 1948 at the Café Notre Dame in Paris, when Jorn, Constant, Karel Appel, Corneille, Dotremont, and Joseph Noiret walked out of a Revolutionary Surrealist conference of the “International Center for the Documentation of Avant-Garde Art,” and together signed a manifesto entitled, “La cause était entendue” (The Cause Was Understood). Cobra was Dotremont’s term, both an anagram of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, and a reference to the cobra as a mythic symbol appearing in numerous world cultures. The Cobra manifesto called for “an organic
experimental collaboration that rejects all sterile and dogmatic theories.”

Dotremont, an energetic organizer, poet, and artist, would become the editor-in-chief of the Cobra journal; Jorn acted as co-organizer and editor. The articles in the journal further developed the group’s interest in medieval and tribal art, folk traditions from around the globe, and materialism—meaning both Marxist political theory and artistic materiality as opposed to metaphysics. Jorn continued to collaborate with specialists of other fields, producing a series of word-paintings with Dotremont and planning a book on Danish archaeology with P.V. Glob, among other projects. Despite the interest of critics like Ragon and Michel Tapié, however, Cobra was marginalized in Paris amidst the rise of Informel and Lyrical Abstraction. It flourished, however, in the other northern European capitals of its “members” (always an unofficial grouping since the artists refused to follow the Bretonian example of regulating its membership).

The most significant public representation of the group was the Cobra exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1949. It was organized by Willem Sandberg and designed by architect Aldo Van Eyck, a Cobra affiliate who designed several playgrounds and later became known for his Amsterdam Children’s Home. The exhibition opened with a scandal when fighting broke out among the Dutch-speaking audience, apparently due to their misunderstanding of references to the Soviet Union in Dotremont’s speech, a reading of his French manifesto “Le grand rendez-vous naturel.” Dotremont called for a “spontaneous” art breaking away from the naturalism of Surrealism, on the one hand, and Socialist Realism on the other, as well as rejecting the non-objective approach of total abstraction.

The other major Cobra manifestation was the 1951 exhibition at Liège, organized by the young Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky. It included a number of artists not associated with the group (such as Alberto Giacometti and Hans Hartung), in order to provide some broader context and, perhaps, legitimacy for the movement. French critic Charles Estienne, the champion of Tachisme, wrote the catalogue essay. Like the Stedelijk show, it featured Van Eyck’s innovative exhibition design, with works hung in compositions that treated the entire wall as a grid. Heerup’s carved granite sculptures were set on beds of coal as a gesture to the significance of organic materials and the local economy of Liège, which depended on coal production. Jorn, however, was not present at either show, in part because of a schism within the group that he had precipitated by starting an affair with Constant’s wife Matie, who would eventually become Jorn’s second wife.

During this period Jorn continued to write many articles primarily for Scandinavian publications on art and architecture, plus a 600-page manuscript, “Blade af kunstens bog” (Pages from the Book on Art), the second volume of which would be revised and published years later as Magi og skønne kunster (Magic and the Fine Arts). These texts unfolded his continually evolving critical views on socialism and the evils of capitalism, art’s role in society, architecture and decoration, symbolism and semiotics, and other topics.
In these articles, Jorn worked through the lessons he had learned from Léger and Le Corbusier in Paris, unfolding in detail his perspectives on aesthetics and the relationship between art and architecture. He supported the integration of artistic expression into modern architecture, praising precedents in folk and non-Western art as well as Jugendstil, and was highly critical of the relegation of art to secondary status in Functionalist architecture. His response was not a pure negation of Functionalism, however, but a measured critique that recognized the significance of its demands for harmony. In “Apollo or Dionysus?” he argues that the tendency toward beauty and classicism in culture is that of the ruling class. It must be answered dialectically—not with a pure Romantic negation, but with a synthesis incorporating irrational and spontaneous expression, integrating ornament with architectural form. Jorn’s theoretical activity subsided temporarily with the beginning of his Cobra activities in 1948. He had decided, as he later described it, to “forget that irritating pile of papers which had poisoned my life for several years.”

Cobra focused explicitly on collaboration, experimenting with different arts and media. The artists valued aesthetic experience as opposed to the creation of objects, and interpreted art as materially embodying a political and ethical critique. Cobra, according to Jorn, attempted to exclude the term “art” altogether, and replace it with “experimental action.” A highpoint of Cobra activity for Jorn was the “Bregnerød Congress,” a collective experiment in mural decoration at a house in the Danish countryside owned by the architecture school of the Copenhagen Art Academy. Jorn, his colleagues, and their children decorated its walls and ceiling with murals in the context of a two-week conference of art-making, cooking, writing, and general merriment.

The Bregnerød murals

Painted by members of the Cobra group in August and September, 1949, the murals at Bregnerød exemplified many of the same ideals as the kindergarten murals. Where the Hjortøgade site fostered an approach related to the children’s activities, the Bregnerød house was designed and built in 1936 in the Ravnsholt forest outside Copenhagen by architecture students of the Danish Art Academy, and made available for the use of students in all departments. Jorn was likely familiar with its spaces, notably a large, modern two-story common room with a fireplace on the lower floor, beneath an extended pitched roof. The style of the structure could broadly be called Functionalist, tempered with the broader Scandinavian tendency toward harmony with the natural environment, evidenced by the double sloping roofs of the structure, which followed the hillside. It featured a second large common space with a monumental square window and Venetian blinds facing a small lake. Its walls were largely undecorated, adorned on the exterior only with the patterns of the bricks donated from Frederiksholm Teglværk that gave the house its official name, Frederiksholmshytten. Jorn secured permission to stay in the...
house for an international Cobra congress he was planning, on the condition that the artists repaint its interior. He likely did not specify exactly what he had in mind, but he clearly saw a chance to put his architectural theories into action.

The School of Architecture, Jorn observed in 1943, was at odds with the rest of the Art Academy due to its increasing focus on mathematics, technical training, and monumentally scaled buildings with hundreds of units. Given the spread of Functionalism, he wrote, architecture “stands in direct conflict with the whole arts movement.” Jorn obtained donations of paint by a local supplier as well as a mandate from the Art Academy to “redecorate” the walls of the house, probably on the assumption that the artists would repaint them white. In the end, the group détourned a modest experiment in Danish Functionalism into a unique site of international, experimental, and untrained creative expression. Bregnerød differs to some extent from Hjortøgade in that the images by Jorn and Pedersen seem more influenced by Surrealist automatism, Jugendstil ornament, and Viking interlace than Klee-style modernism and children’s art, though both make direct reference to popular motifs. By 1949, Jorn conceived of the importance of Bregnerød more explicitly than the kindergarten project as a critical architectural statement, and it remains much better known due to its importance for Cobra. The project exemplifies, in a much more deliberate manner, Jorn’s critique of individualist, academic, classically-planned architecture by means of collective art making in a festive atmosphere.

Jorn had planned the Cobra congress earlier that year with Constant and Dotremont. He managed to bring a large and varied group together, despite the fact that Constant and the Dutch artists stayed away, understandably angry that Jorn and Matie had declared their love for each other and left their respective partners a few months earlier. (Jorn’s own marriage had been strained since his latest long trip to Paris in 1948.) Matie brought her and Constant’s two daughters to live with Jorn at Bregnerød during the Cobra Congress.

The painters included Jorn, Stephen Gilbert, Anders Österlin, Mogens Balle, Carl-Henning Pedersen, his daughter Vibeke Alfelt, and Jorn’s eldest son from his first marriage, Klaus. They painted collectively, each sharing a section, door, ceiling panel, or wall. The fantastic and colorful scenes (most of which are unfortunately only visible in black-and-white reproduction today) emphasize the flatness of the wall surfaces through decorative pattern-like designs (Fig. 2.4).

Jorn developed flowing lines, decorative arabesques and whiplash curves in his wall painting. The designs directly recalled the imaginative architecture of Surrealism and Jugendstil. The murals developed organic relationships around the interior space, unified not in style but in their overall challenge to the rectilinear geometry of the building as a whole. Dotremont’s utopian account of the experience in *Le petit Cobra*, the internal organ of *Cobra* he published in Brussels, presents Bregnerød as the achievement of the group’s
goals of spontaneous, collective, interdisciplinary work. He describes the event as a “First International Cobra Congress” where non-painters painted and non-sculptors sculpted, non-poets composed poetry, and everyone spoke a pidgin of several languages. Dotremont’s celebratory account may have exaggerated the accomplishment of what Peter Shield asserts was as much summer vacation as artistic experiment. In reality, the painters primarily did the murals. Jorn, Pedersen, and Gilbert took the large wall sections, Österlin and Hultén most of the ceiling, with sections by others like Balle, who stopped by. Klaus Jorn painted one of the two doors to the shared sleeping quarters, Dotremont and Gilbert another. Yet the moment of collectivity, where artists of all disciplines worked, cooked, and lived together in a small shared space, remained memorable for the participants, encapsulating their ideals of a socialist society devoted to play and creativity.

Jorn wrote with mixed feelings of the project a year after its completion. Like Dotremont, he emphasizes its collective and spontaneous creation, but also the decorative flatness of the images themselves:

What made this experiment something wholly special was partly that the decorating is a collective venture, carried out by several painters without any prior planning of the work itself, and partly that no previous preliminary studies of the decorations have been undertaken. Everything has literally grown out of the surfaces in the
indirect confrontation of artist and wall. Finally, no distinction between architecture and painting has been attempted. We have tried to paint everywhere […] there was somewhere to paint. A conscious break, then, with Classicist design. That the many different artistic personalities who unfold themselves here side by side do not disrupt the artistic unity is due to the fact that they collaborate in advance in a common language of painting. And when the consequent […] decoration does not dissolve the room, this is because it was overall powerfully realized flat painting without any attempt at perspectival effects of illusion.

Jorn’s account emphasizes the rejection of spatial illusionism in the murals (which ensures the unity of the overall space), the festive atmosphere and spontaneity, and the shared language of painting the artists developed together. Jorn embraces flat shapes for their decorative and symbolic qualities. Their linear complexity also related to automatic drawing, signifying spontaneity and dynamic motion. Jorn summarized these qualities in his frequent reference at the time to the idea of the “arabesque.”

Jorn referred to a wide range of curvilinear designs as “arabesques,” following a long tradition in architectural criticism. The arabesque was a term inherited from Orientalist discussions of classical versus non-Western culture and reintroduced in Erik Lundberg’s Arkitecturens formspråk, which explored in detail the aesthetics of pre-classical and non-Western ornament and praised its qualities of vitality and harmonious complexity. The concept of the arabesque became for Jorn a way to relate the intricate patterns of Islamic decoration to folk, Medieval, and Viking design, as well as the Arabic popular motifs he investigated in his stay on the Tunisian island of Djerba in 1948. He associated the arabesque with spontaneity, opposing its use in Asian and Islamic cultures to the classical tradition of rational and clear, geometrically proportioned decoration. Yet Jorn’s definition of the arabesque was itself not fixed but changing. It was not only a form but also a unity of form and content. He argues for a “life’s arabesque” beyond the stylistic opposition of the romantic to the classical, a new holistic “solution” to the dichotomy of form and content, art and life. This approach, he argues, “finds something in life’s arabesque that exists neither in the alleged genius of the monumental / heroic, nor in the rational aesthetic.” In “What Is an Ornament?” Jorn writes that there are two types of ornament—monumental decoration and the “spontaneous arabesque”:

The typical characteristic of constructed monumental decoration is that it will seek to form a finite whole, whereas the organic arabesque (even though it may consist of fully rounded elements) always manifests itself as a set of elements within a greater whole, as moving elements within that greater whole. Put briefly, one may define monumentalist decoration as static ornamentation and arabesque as dynamic ornamentation.

Jorn relates the arabesque to not only Islamic and Asian, but also medieval (especially Gothic) and Rococo architecture, relating Rococo designs directly to Chinese decoration. He maintains that the arabesque resurfaced historically in Art Nouveau and Jugendstil, followed by “a curious split” in the era of
modernism that separated art from architecture, so that abstract artists like Munch and the Fauves carried on the arabesque form separated from its content. This meant that the form became merely a compositional device in easel painting, rather than an architectural decoration, able to unify aesthetic feeling with the context of everyday existence, in what Jorn calls living form.

He appreciates Kandinsky for producing the “first spontaneous, abstract arabesque paintings,” noting their “parallel in [Danish Jugendstil designer Thorvald] Bindesbøll’s ornamentation.” Yet while Munch and Kandinsky would be major inspirations for Jorn’s own easel painting, his attempts to link organic form to the wider environment drew on the Jugendstil lineage of artist / designers like Bindesbøll whose works reached beyond the narrow confines of painting.

Jorn associates the “dynamic ornamentation” of the arabesque with movement itself. His texts relate the form to scientific investigations of motion: new quantum physics models of movement in the form of electromagnetic waves on the microscopic level, as well as macroscopic patterns such as animal migrations and planetary orbits. Like his evocations of “popular art,” the “arabesque” is a deliberately broad, holistic idea that stands for spontaneous expression in all forms and media. His own work manifests it by means of complex interlocking motifs in curvilinear, intersecting linear networks. He regards such forms as anti-classical, non-rational, and allied to the “folk / banal, or spontaneous art.” He considers them to express natural harmony and spontaneous, dynamic motion, elements he utilizes to revitalize the Functionalist space. The elaborate linear designs on the wall mural appear “automatic” because of their complexity and sweeping organic movement, seemingly without beginning or end, even though he worked them out in sketches beforehand.

The arabesque forms in his mural related directly to motifs explored in his drawings and paintings at the time. Jorn’s claim to work totally spontaneously is belied by his own painterly sketches for the wall and ceiling compositions that still exist in Silkeborg (Color Plate 3). These diverge from the final image in scale and composition, however, suggesting that Jorn developed from these studies as he worked. Jorn used the sketches as a starting point, adding and developing figures or changing the direction they face. The sketches also suggest the vividness of the colors in his murals. In the end, even if both Jorn and Dotremont exaggerated the extent of spontaneous creation in the murals, the spontaneous transformation of existing imagery is evident in the compositions themselves and aligns with Cobra’s broader interest in popular imagery combined with gestural expression. The forms that appear in the studies recall several Iron Age objects Jorn would have been familiar with from the National Museum in Copenhagen. Jorn became familiar with the collection during the Helhæsten period through the archaeologist P.V. Glob, and he later had Gérard Franceschi photograph many of the same objects for his Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism in the 1960s.
Scandinavian art another manifestation of anonymous popular creativity. His Cobra-period motifs paid tribute to their artistic legacy. While the motifs recall the ancient forms, however, they do not mimic them. Like a jazz improvisation, they present a spontaneous expression that developed directly out of these artistic precedents. The appearance of spontaneity is a conscious language encoded in the final images.

The fish/mermaid design on the single Bregnerød ceiling panel Jorn painted (Fig. 2.5) also appears in a similar painterly study of 1949. The hybrid figure of Jorn’s ceiling panel appears in black outlines and areas of color blocked into the delineated shapes, all applied with a dry brush indicating that Jorn did not pause to refill the brush with paint. His quick process gives an appearance of informality, contingency, and immersion in the moment.
Eyes appear on the Picassoid mermaid face as well as the unexpected “fish” head inside her body, suggesting that the form was an afterthought arising in the process of sketching linear patterns on the wood, even though it was already present in the initial composition on canvas. The compositions in fact are not about spontaneity alone, but more specifically a dialogue between the bodily movement of the hand and the memory of popular imagery. Jorn spent a winter in Djerba with his first wife and children in order to investigate the “oriental” aesthetic of ornament introduced to him by Erik Lundberg’s book Arkitekturens formspråk. In Tunisia, the hand of Fatima and the holy fish motifs that he saw everywhere impressed Jorn. He viewed the fish as an authentic folk symbol. His ceiling panel merges the Islamic fish with the mermaid, a major Scandinavian folk symbol, seen for example in the pre-Christian imagery in the chalk paintings or Kalkmalerier of Danish churches discussed in Helhesten. The panel transforms international popular imagery, celebrating its cultural roots in centuries past while opening it to new readings.

Unfortunately, we can no longer closely evaluate the wall murals or the finished project as a whole, since the murals were whitewashed in the 1960s, after moisture had already largely destroyed them, and only the ceiling remains today at Sophienholm in Copenhagen. Jorn did not intervene to save them; in fact, he writes that the quick and inexpensive painting techniques and temporary lifespan of the murals were important aspects of their meaning. More broadly, the emphasis on the social experience over the finished work exemplified the way the collective practices of Cobra anticipate contemporary Relational aesthetics. Jorn believed that the role of artists was to inspire by example, through their embrace of a creative life, rather than either to create finished works which would only end up decorating the homes of the wealthy, like a painter, or to redesign the everyday lives of the working class, like a modern architect. Although the Cobra artists did not invite an outside audience to help make the work, they did invite non-artists within their social circle to make art as part of a general rejection of specialization, and the primary importance of the Bregnerød Congress for the participants was as a festive social event. The Bregnerød murals attempted to redefine “painting” from a noun to a verb, considering painting a process of redefining a space, transforming it into something at once more social and more artistic, in a new holistic statement that was simultaneously personal and collective.

Despite his interest in architectural murals inspired by Léger and Le Corbusier, Jorn rejected the emphasis of those artists on designing a complete socialist environment, which he felt only led to the rationalist plans of Functionalism. He critiqued the notion of design creating a new modernist lifestyle for its technocratic and authoritarian tendency. Jorn argues that, “we need an art that is living, a part of life itself,” adding that the most useful goal for artists is to attack the artistic establishment that prevents the working classes from understanding their own creative potential. In regard to murals, he continues: “It is not a question of decorating a few public buildings, which are an expression of everything the natural person reacts against, social controls,
churches, town halls, police stations and schools, but first and foremost to make productive life a natural, organic, collaborative whole.”

Perhaps this is why Jorn produced so many more murals in private settings throughout his life; the Kindergarten and Bregnerød house were the exceptions. Unlike the 1930s murals of Le Corbusier, his were meant to inspire in the broadest possible sense, rather than to instruct or to enforce social ideals upon a population. For this reason, the gestural nature of both sets of murals was essential to their message of free expression. In rendering personal expression at a public scale, they broke down the strict opposition of public and private space, countering the ideals of public order inherent in the architecture with a seemingly chaotic organicism. The unprecedented combination of automatic drawing, popular motifs, and dynamic monumental imagery at Bregnerød created an aesthetic tension that suggests the mutual interdependence of collective space and personal expression, the situation Nancy describes as “being singular plural.”

Common imagery

After three years of frenetic activity, Cobra collapsed along with Jorn’s health. Jorn had two more children with Matie, and they spent a couple of years in Denmark and Paris before he was forced to return to Silkeborg to recover from tuberculosis in 1951. After the years of hand-to-mouth living experienced by all the Cobra artists in a Europe still struggling to recover from the war, Dotremont also fell ill, and joined Jorn at the Silkeborg Sanatorium the following year. They officially disbanded Cobra. The last Cobra works Jorn painted in Paris as he began to fall ill included Ørnens ret (The Eagle’s Share) I and II, which have a unique bearing on the problem of singular expression and communal imagery in relationship to Jorn’s personal, political, and artistic situation at the time.

The Cobra artists maintained Helhesten’s emphasis on an experimental modernism allied with popular art. At the same time, cultural professionals in France, eager to hold onto the country’s international artistic prominence and to distance themselves from the Fascist populism of Vichy, revived prewar discussions of the avant-garde as a progressive force and marginalized popular art because its legacy was too closely bound to the polarized political factions of the 1930s. Cobra emphasized from the beginning the practice of “experimental art” rather than “avant-garde” art, considering the “avant-garde” increasingly problematic as every faction of the art world seemed to lay claim to it in polemical public declarations. Remembering the radical avant-garde roots of the interest in popular art at a time when information on the prewar avant-gardes was scarce, the group proclaimed, “popular art is the brother of experimental art” and “expressionism draws from the same sources as popular art.”

The Cobra journal’s fourth issue (November 1949) was devoted explicitly to “folk art.” It included reproductions of work by two
Dutch “Sunday painters” as well as an unsigned détournement (by Jan Elburg) of Titian’s Venus of Urbino, a cheap reproduction on which the reclining nude’s head was replaced with that of a grimacing old man, with a couple of striking laborers inserted into her boudoir. Issue 6 (April 1950) included articles on popular Italian, German, and African Bambara art. It also featured Christian Dotremont’s article “Le grand rendez-vous naturel,” which described the 1949 Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, as “the first, spontaneous rendezvous of popular art and free experimental art.”

In Denmark, folkekunst, which translates equally to “folk art” or “popular art,” had been a prominent topic of debates on the political left since the early twentieth century. Jorn’s socialist conception of folk art took direct inspiration from German and French avant-garde precedents. The Blaue Reiter Almanach of 1912, for example, with its reproductions of children’s art and discussions of popular traditions such as Bavarian painting on glass, had a profound impact on the Danish Helhesten artists. During the Second World War, the turn to folk art developed in part as an explicit rejection of the Fascist uses of the concept. After the war, it also related to an interest in recognizing local traditions threatened by the homogenous nature of modernism as it became an official ideology. When the Danish artists (driven largely by Jorn) conceived of an international organization after the end of the war, they argued that their work would be based on the “living artistic tradition” of each country, at once experimental in the avant-garde tradition and rooted in specific cultural contexts. The recognition of the significance of culture’s connection to geography is an enduring legacy of Helhesten and Cobra. Yet just as the artists considered personal expression as emerging only in a collective context, they recognized the significance of local tradition as only legible in relation to international perspectives. As Jean-Clarence Lambert notes, the Cobra interest in popular culture was explicitly international in outlook and thus an “alternative to the chauvinism of the ‘return to the land’” associated with Fascist culture.

Jorn attempts to link existing forms of folk culture to the international socialist conception of the (urban) proletariat. He sees this folk culture manifest not only in relics of the past like ancient Scandinavian rock paintings or medieval church graffiti, but also in contemporary popular festivals and picture scrapbooks, all of which are discussed in the book he was working on as Cobra was founded in 1948, Guldhorn og lykkehjul (The Golden Horns and the Wheel of Fortune). The Golden Horns book includes photographs of contemporary life next to drawings of petroglyphs, heraldic symbols, masks, coin designs, astrological symbols, and other heterogeneous forms of mythic imagery, in order to show the continuity of ancient popular symbols into the present. It presents Jorn’s understanding of popular art as something embodied in mythic symbols created anonymously in ancient societies and passed down to contemporary culture in various forms. Jorn considered the imagery discussed in the book as a continually evolving popular art, created anonymously for reasons related to the everyday functioning of a community, such as the seasonal cycles of
agriculture which led to the origins of the zodiac in ancient Babylon. His found imagery demonstrates the way ancient symbols of myth and ritual persist in contemporary life in forms such as Carnival costumes or decorative motifs, and fulfill the same function: not only to hold a community together but also to create new ways of envisioning its constantly evolving identity.

Many of the images Jorn favored over the years were symbols of humanity’s relation to nature and animal life, as opposed to its conquering of nature: the dragon, rather than St. George. Jorn often refers to the popular tradition of illustrating social relations using animals and monsters. He traces this lineage of popular art back through early, animated Disney cartoons to the French nineteenth-century illustrator Grandville. He describes his vision of a new popular art in a letter to Constant from 1950:

Popular art is always fantastic and symbolic. There is Grandville and Walt Disney and there is us. Often one can better describe the essence of struggles among men by means of primitive, simple, fantastic beasts, raw instincts, than by painting an individual situation, a battle between police and striking workers […] It is necessary to surpass this individualism in art and arrive at symbols common to all. […] We must not describe the human animal, but rather describe ourselves as human animals.

Jorn understands symbolic, mythic, and animal imagery as fundamentally social, linking artists to their audience across diverse social contexts. The impact of the Cobra movement, emphatically interdisciplinary and critical of specialization, on modernist painting could be stated simply as an attempt to turn painting from a high art into a folk art, rejecting an alienating language of abstraction in favor of an expressive transformation of images common to all.

Jorn turned toward an explicitly populist and expressive approach to history painting in the Cobra period in two related series of works he called “Krigsvisioner” (War Visions) and “Historiebilleder” (History Pictures). These works responded directly to the impending Cold War and the threat of nuclear annihilation, using symbolic animal forms. Ørnens ret (The Eagle’s Share) II, one of the “War Visions,” demonstrates the transformation of popular illustration and folk subject matter in an expressionist gestural language (Fig. 2.6).

The two-headed eagle was an explicit symbol for Jorn of the Cold War superpowers and their escalating threat of world nuclear destruction. Jorn described the image at the time in an unsent letter to Picasso: “I tried to create a symbol for the war, an eagle with a double head on a machine of destruction, which leaves behind no life where it advances.” The double-headed eagle also appears in the Golden Horns book, as a historic heraldic image associated with central European culture before Nazism—surely not a neutral choice. The image draws a parallel between the clash of contemporary Cold War powers and the history of European imperialism. A black cat, a symbol associated with magic and transformation, and a skull, a symbol of death perhaps inspired by Picasso’s wartime work, cower underneath the trunk-like form of the double-headed eagle, combining heraldic symbol with popular imagery (and expressionist brushwork) in a deliberately heterogeneous combination.
2.6 Asger Jorn, Ørnens ret (The Eagle’s Share) II, 1951. Oil on masonite. 74.5 × 60 cm. Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. Photo: Lars Bay
In the earlier version of this picture, *The Eagle’s Share I*, the near covering of the surface with scumbled black paint disrupts its symbolic content in an intense visual tumult. In *The Eagle’s Share II*, Jorn transforms his earlier work in the direction of kitsch by producing a new recognition of the way that these symbols inherited from ancient folk traditions are now clichéd in mass culture, where their very ubiquity opens them to continual new readings. The emergent figures occupy a purely imaginative space, adhering to the two-dimensional surface by means of sparse brushwork through which parts of the white background appear. Here, contour disappears as color and gesture fuse into a single application evocative of spontaneous drawing in the manner of children’s art or graffiti. This apparent directness has contributed to the mischaracterization of these works as a renewed Expressionism, not least because their dark tone clearly related to Jorn’s personal illness at the time. The combination of gestural painting with kitsch imagery, however, destroys any implication of direct emotional expression. The brush gestures indicate the momentary and partial nature of the imaginative process as much as a claim to authenticity. Jorn’s gesture collapses the Expressionist mark with the collective symbols of kitsch. The work is not only a political statement on the Cold War but also a critique of the purity of high modernism. His process is also paradoxical in that generally speaking, popular art is associated, as Jorn repeatedly observed, with anonymous collective production. In this way his Cobra painting revisits the themes of Bregnerød, with a new nuance. Where the murals demonstrate that personal expression is also always collective, the paintings indicate that collective expression is also always personal. Unique people working in a specific society created all the anonymous popular art discussed in the *Helhesten* and *Cobra* journals. Whether or not the artists’ names are remembered, human hands and minds always create popular art, however it is defined.

**The Silent Myth murals**

In late 1951, while slowly recovering from his debilitating bout of malnutrition and tuberculosis, Jorn requested a studio space in the Silkeborg Sanatorium. The only space the institution could provide was a room next to the morgue. Jorn found it strangely invigorating to paint adjacent to a room dedicated to the dead. “It is as if I on my side of the wall must fight against the power which triumphs on the other side,” he wrote. It was here that Jorn produced the first studies for his next major statement on the singular expression of popular tradition, a series of large-scale paintings based on a sketchbook he titled “Elaboration d’une mythe muet” (Elaboration of a Silent Myth). He drew and painted in the sanatorium and continued on a larger scale after he recovered, in a long, dim studio at Vestergade 22 in Silkeborg above his friend Johannes Jensen’s photography studio. He decided to dedicate these murals to the Silkeborg Bibliotek, the library where they still hang today.
The two large paintings, *Opus 2* and *Opus 7*, hang next to each other on a wall above a staircase, invisible until the visitor walks up and turns around, to apprehend them suddenly and dramatically. The third, *Livshjulet* (*The Wheel of Life*), hangs nearby. Their presence in such a banal yet intellectually and socially meaningful space is unexpected and moving, considering that their presence was Jorn’s gift, a thanks for a lifetime of inspiration there. In his dedicatory speech, Jorn thanked the Silkeborg community for creating such an opportunity for differing viewpoints on art to manifest. He also noted that although some would appreciate the works and some would be disturbed by them, it is the observer who creates not only meaning, but also value in them.

The paintings’ presence in the library is a validation of one of Jorn’s lifelong struggles, to provide an art that is simultaneously formally challenging and accessible, physically and imaginatively, to a broader public.

The paintings were the largest ones he had done so far, the first murals Jorn was able to do since Bregnerød, even if for mundane reasons they were painted on canvas rather than the wall itself. *Opus 2* and *Opus 7* are horizontal-format works depicting fantastic “cosmic” landscapes with strange creatures inhabiting water, earth, and sky simultaneously. Fluid brushwork unites the organically contoured figures with the background, making them indistinguishable except where faces are delineated. Vivid colors seem to represent the full spectrum, colors of earth and sky suggesting a landscape below a bright yellow sun in *Opus 2* (Color Plate 4).

The composition of *Opus 2* is divided along the two central axes into areas for various figures, compositional divisions that originated with the page divisions in Jorn’s sketchbook. The figures are a menagerie of forms evoking various beings and environments: a brown and blue “sea” creature rises from a blue-violet “ocean” at left, facing a murky green, yellow, and black monster head under the yellow sun, surrounded by thick brushstrokes of sky. The relationship to actual myths in these murals cannot be specified, since the figures are too partial and general to identify any more than provisionally. They seem to form themselves out of the picture surface and are inseparable from it. Troels Andersen notes a close similarity in compositional structure between the “Silent Myth” paintings and Jorn’s 1959 ceramic mural in Århus, writing, “Jorn tries to destroy the symbolism and the metaphors in the figures, not merely by emphasizing their multiplicity of meaning but by dissolving them in the material itself.” Their relationship to “myth,” therefore, can only be described in the most general sense, evoking its broadest possible meanings in human society. In their foregrounding of process, they demonstrate Jorn’s continuing interest in mythmaking rather than mythology, meaning the process of developing new beings, iconographies, and mythic symbols while resisting definitive narratives.

At center right of *Opus 2* is an orange creature with a strangely bulbous profile. The formal sources for this grotesque head demonstrate the way Jorn related myth to, on the one hand, popular culture, and, on the other, the language of modernism from Munch to Picasso. The particular shape of these painterly heads, with their bulbous foreheads and noses, recurs in
Jorn's painting from this point onward. They certainly relate to folk art, in the form of medieval carvings or prints, such as the image of the wandering Jew that makes an appearance in the *Golden Horns* book as well as other texts and paintings by Jorn. These figures also recall the forms of Picasso's portraits of the 1930s with their dominant noses and grotesque features, in particular during the years Jorn was first in Paris, 1937–1938. Jorn's bulbous face, particularly as it develops in his sketches, shows affinities to Picasso's portrait drawings and sculptures of Marie-Thérèse from the late 1930s with their spherical, segmented forms. Jorn incorporates Picasso's experimental Cubist forms into much more aggressively material and gestural compositions. The reference to avant-garde abstraction in these figures gives the mythic imagery an experimental and decidedly physical (as opposed to metaphysical) aspect.

Below the orange head in *Opus 2* is a blue-violet bird which seems to be lying or sleeping in a protective cocoon, next to a group of greenish vegetal forms related to a series of sketches of vegetation from 1951–1952 (these forms could also be read as a giant face or faces with giant ears and / or a snout). They recall the photographs of natural forms, medieval and Jugendstil decorations Jorn used to illustrate articles such as "What is an Ornament?". Above these stands a blue figure memorable for its humanoid features and, in particular, its white staring eyes surrounded by lashes. These staring eyes also recall Jorn's avant-garde inspirations, from the late paintings of Francis Picabia to his Helhesten colleague Carl-Henning Pedersen. The figure holds in its right hand a small flame or flower, a common motif in Jorn's work at this time. Different observers will inevitably read the meaning of these figures differently. With a little imagination, all of them can be read as smiling, in a carnivalesque celebration emerging from what appears to be a primordial sludge. The paint is thick and opaque, almost as if finger-painted, with white canvas visible through the aggressive brushwork, flattening the scene into a collection of colorful forms surging along curvilinear networks across the surface.

*Opus 7* (Color Plate 5) is more vivid and dynamic, with greater diagonal energy and strong formal contrasts. The colors are also more fiery, with intense pinks and reds complementing the greens, browns, blues, yellows, and blacks. Another humanoid face looms at right, this one larger and more distinct, although the specific expression on the face is open to interpretation. The face is an abstract portrait of Jorn's cousin Mads, who was badly injured both physically and mentally in a train accident. Atkins writes that Jorn admired Mads’s insight and sympathized with his ability to begin again after such an ordeal. Jorn developed the figure of Mads in sketches and prints in this period, identified by his large, heavy head and deformed arm. Mads seems to bear witness to the primordial scene before him, here a chaos of swirling figures without any horizon line or other spatial referent. Strong diagonal axes are contrasted with rounded forms such as the massive central sea-creature and bird-monsters in yellow and pale green. Rather than the fossilized vision of the past typically associated with ancient myths, the image implies a procreative process of life struggling to form itself from chaos.
2.7 Asger Jorn, *Livshjulet (The Wheel of Life)* (version 1), 1951–1952. Oil on canvas. 155.5 × 135.5 cm. Collection Gudrun and Viggo Nielsen, Roskilde
Jorn acknowledges that he used all the colors in the rainbow for the third major work for the Silkeborg Bibliotek, *The Wheel of Life* (Fig. 2.7), because it was supposed to depict “all of life.”

Its holistic ambitions directly recall its sources not only in popular imagery, but also in the Romantic eccentricity of William Blake. The library painting (see Fig. 2.9) is the third known version of the “wheel of life” composition. The original version was the first picture Jorn painted in the sanatorium studio after becoming well enough to paint (Fig. 2.7).

The composition relates directly to a group of images by William Blake that Jorn saw in reproduction at the time, and he may have seen other Blake images in Paris. Blake’s watercolor *The Fall of Man* is a complex scene of God surrounded by angels above Christ in the center, flanked by Adam and Eve and crying angels (Fig. 2.8).

Human souls fall down from heaven on either side of the image, to the interior of the earth where Satan has awakened the figures of Sin, Death, and Hell. On either side of the Holy Spirit above Christ’s head are the Tree of Life and the coiled serpent of Satan. Jorn transfers from Blake’s composition the dynamic spiraling form of souls traveling between realms and the structure of earth as the lower two-thirds of the composition where the falling souls descend. He transforms the scene into a wheel of life, however, by depicting the souls at right as embryonic beings resembling single cells, rising from the earth as if being born. He also replaces the two trees with the pagan sun and moon symbols. Where Blake creates a complicated symbolic mandala in the form of idealized, naturalistic figures in a convincing space, placing Christ centrally on a cloud-bank above two eagles, Jorn, by contrast, insists on the iconic centrality of the dynamic wheel structure itself. His work utilizes the texture and intense colors of the paint to contribute to the dynamic sense of motion he depicts, although the first version is unique in Jorn’s painting for its thin washes of paint that directly reference Blake’s watercolors. Jorn inscribed on the back of the picture, “Better a lovable devil than an incompetent God [Mieux vaut un diable aimable qu’un Dieu incapable],” turning Blake’s Christian cosmology on its head even as he subverted the British artist’s idealist, classicizing style. The first and second versions lack the visual impact of the third version in the library, with its kitschy coloring-book-style brushwork and thickly impastoed, visceral texture (Fig. 2.9).
2.9 Asger Jorn, *Livshjulet (The Wheel of Life), Opus 4* (version 3), 1953. Oil on masonite. 130.7 × 105.2 cm. Silkeborg Bibliotek. Photo: Lars Bay
The Statens Museum bought the second *Wheel of Life* painting (not illustrated) in 1953 from an exhibition in Copenhagen, giving Jorn an unexpected economic bonus but also requiring him to paint another version for the library. Jorn called the third version the “final and most successful, but also a little tired.” There is a sense of material inertia in the relative solidity of its form, but also duration, as if the form were buried within the long history of mythic imagery. It relates to both tapestry in its thick texture and heavily outlined forms, and popular illustration in its simple and humorous, here especially clown-like, faces.

Unlike the other two murals in the library, the *Wheel of Life* depicts a specific symbol that Jorn abstracts into evocative forms in order to make it more universal. The wheel of life was a major theme of medieval artwork that Jorn traced back in his writings to ancient imagery and still current symbols such as astrological charts. Jorn explained that this painting, created in a more clearly circular composition, depicts an old motif, like one finds in the churches. Below we see the earth, and children grow up out of it, and above they fall in love with each other; there are couples making love and a pregnant woman, and then they fall down on the other side and die, and then we have the dead down in the earth again, so life sort of grows forth out of death.

Rather than the Christian image of God in the center, Jorn depicts a pagan sun–moon motif in the first two versions. In the third, he places a clownish human face whose contours mimic those of the barely-delineated “human” figures surrounding it, each one defined with a black dot for an eye and a rounded head, colored white, yellow, or beige except for the prenatal beings in green at the lower right. As in the larger two murals, the paint here is applied thickly in somewhat patterned brushstrokes that seem to slide into and around each other on the surface. Despite its compositional structure, the wheel image seems to vibrate and move due to the incredibly active paint surface and the intense colors.

Jorn maintains that the image of the wheel of life is not a circle, indicating a return to origins or a recurrent cycle of nature, but rather a more dynamic form, the spiral. He explains that “the conservative perceives life as an eternal circulation in a ring, and the radical perceives it all as a radiant march forward along a logical and straight line, whilst the truth is that the movement contains both these elements, that the basic motion of matter has the character of the spiral.” Jorn became particularly interested in the spiral motif in 1952–1953; it seems to replace his earlier emphasis on the arabesque. He had been a member since 1949 of Spiralen (The Spiral), an exhibiting group founded by painter Mogens Balle in 1947 to support an experimental gestural art. In the 1953 Spiralen exhibition catalog, Jorn printed a series of spiral drawings attempting to visualize his “dynamic philosophy and interpretation of art.” The drawings, each labeled with a group of three terms such as “Science, Experiment, Art” or “Quality, Quantity, Value,” anticipate his “triolectic graphs” of the early 1960s.
Jorn wrote of the wheel of life and the spiral in numerous texts, typically relating the symbol to its social manifestations, for example in modern Carnival celebrations. In the *Golden Horns* book, Jorn writes extensively about the symbol, both in the original Cobra-period text and in the 1957 postscript, and provides found illustrations of it. The cover of the book itself was a combined lino- and woodcut print done around 1952. The cover image relates closely to his paintings, featuring a swirling mass of figural forms surging upwards and counterclockwise around a central goblin-like figure shown in profile, laughing. The swirling linocut figures are more fluid, calligraphic, and abstract than in the paintings. In the postscript, Jorn illustrates the wheel of life image from Birkeroed church outside Copenhagen (very close to Bregnerød). Jorn refers to many such kalkmalerier or chalk paintings in his description. The iconography of these images in Danish churches dates back to pre-Christian times. Below the Birkeroed illustration appear quotations from Goethe, Spinoza, and Augustinus on the meaning of the wheel. A page of the main text illustrates a whole series of wheel of life and calendar-wheel images. These include: a “solar wheel” or perhaps sundial image from the Scandinavian helleristninger, or prehistoric rock carvings; a clock proposed as its contemporary heir; a wheel-of-fortune tarot card; a planisphere from a manuscript dated 1087; a Judeo-Christian symbol juxtaposing the signs of the zodiac with the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 Apostles; and illustrations of the zodiac signs clipped from an almanac. The visual and textual evidence together convey the cultural transmission of various symbols and their specific manifestations in different social contexts.

Jorn argues in the text that the wheel of life relates to the ancient zodiac, and thus at its most fundamental level indicates the passing of the seasons, situating human culture as part of the natural cycles. Jorn believed that the pictorial symbols of the zodiac were the first thing recorded by early farmers, preexisting writing. These pictures did not originate to illustrate myths or hero stories, but rather the other way around. His iconological discussion in the afterword attempts to trace the wheel back from a symbol of the cycle of worldly power, as it appeared in medieval times, to its earlier appearances in prehistoric images. Jorn writes of its numerous incarnations from sun symbol to peace symbol, its Biblical symbolism, and Plato’s interpretation of it as the perfect form, all maintaining the fundamental meaning of order imposed on the chaos of the universe. Although Jorn was clearly fascinated with the symbol in his earlier text, his 1957 afterword demonstrates some skepticism toward its rigidity as an element of cultural stasis. He ends with the observation that reality is a combination of the circular return to old ideals and the linear conception of forward progress that has dominated the last few centuries. The spiral symbolizes a compromise between the two viewpoints. The wheel of life as a spiral, then, exemplifies Jorn’s investigation of popular imagery not as a return to old traditions, but their reinvention as a continuing social evolution. His painting of the spiral / wheel in the “Silent Myth” cycle embodies a personal relationship to traditional forms in its
reworking of symbolic imagery in the medium of spontaneous, modernist
gestural abstraction.

As with the Bregnerød murals, Jorn did extensive preparatory sketching
for the “Silent Myth” series, a fact that has surprised some historians.\textsuperscript{84} Guy
Atkins even dismisses these landmark works as “failures,” in part because
of this return to traditional painting, maintaining erroneously that after this
series Jorn rejected both sketching and the easel completely and painted on
the floor or a flat table (in fact, Jorn did all of the above).\textsuperscript{85} As in the images
for his Bregnerød murals, Jorn’s painted imagery appeared all the more
spontaneous because it could be quickly developed from forms worked out in
the sketches. Again, Jorn freely adapted his sketches in the final work rather
than copying them. Jorn’s extensive preparations for this series also indicate
its monumental importance for him, as an investigation of his relationship
to his own cultural roots as well as popular images of myth worldwide. The
project had great personal significance for Jorn as his first major project after
his recovery, his first series done at home since Cobra, and an opportunity to
combine the issues of architectural decoration and mythic content that had
preoccupied him for the previous ten years.

Guy Atkins, who tends to favor Jorn’s freer, more lyrical painting of the
1960s, writes that Jorn’s figures in \textit{Opus 2} and \textit{Opus 7} “look as if they were
lined up in front of a firing squad. They are transfixed and rigid, unreal and
lurid, as in the moment of death.”\textsuperscript{86} His observation seems exaggerated, yet it
perhaps aptly conveys the grotesqueness of the figures and the contradictory
nature of their fluid color and brushwork within a composition that literally
roots them to the land. It is as if they were surging forth from the ground and,
by extension, the culture out of which they emerge. The figures are shaped
in thick, opaque paint arranged in thickly reinforced curving lines that lock
the figures into their originally spontaneous composition like pieces of a
jigsaw puzzle—a compositional technique Jorn learned from Munch. Troels
Andersen observes that the colors of the picture also recall Munch; Jorn had
recently been profoundly moved by the memorial Munch exhibitions he saw
in Copenhagen and Oslo in 1946.\textsuperscript{87} The linking of the figures to the composition
itself suggests a creative but perhaps fraught relationship between movement
and timelessness, a fossilized appearance that contributes to the image’s
evocation of a mythic scene. The effect evokes the function of myth as
explanation of the origin of life. The monsters struggling to free themselves
and engage each other recall in their exaggerated scale the primordial giants
of Nordic and Greek as well as Biblical mythic narratives. Jorn considered
the Olympians’ struggles with the giants in Greek myth—which paralleled
the conflict between the Nordic gods and giants—to symbolize “nothing
more or less than the dread felt by a ruling class of an underclass, which from
time to time attempts to storm Olympia’s hallowed portals and thus unleash
the twilight of the gods; in other words, a revolution, a day of judgment.”\textsuperscript{88}
The story becomes a universal one of class struggle in Jorn’s materialist
worldview. Yet no heroes or gods are present here; only the monsters and
giants themselves being born, long before they are overthrown. Their specific identities are mutable here just as their names have been forgotten as history inevitably favored those of the gods, with their civilized values; and anyway, such iconographic specificities are meaningless, given the murals’ evident physical materiality.

Nor did “myth” in this series simply refer to esoteric ancient narratives; rather, for Jorn it meant something broader, more fundamental, and intimately concerned with the visual imagination. He specified that it was the myths of Jutland that inspired him to make these paintings, in part to repay his debt to that community for nursing him back to health, naming such local sources as writers Johannes V. Jensen, the Silkeborg author of a series of short stories called “Myter” (“myths”), and Thøger Larsen, translator of the Edda into Danish. These sources combined with Jorn’s ongoing interest in N.F.S. Grundtvig’s theories of the “Living Word” discussed in Chapter 1. Whereas Grundtvig advocated the oral retelling of Nordic myth to bring it into dialogue with contemporary society, Jorn’s “silent myth” inspires viewers visually to reinvestigate the old stories and recreate the meaning of myth for themselves. In his speech, Jorn invoked the importance of his homeland, which has inspired him with its living myths in the form of folktales, while emphasizing that he does not refer to any single myth:

In this corner of Jutland, where the life of myth has grown strongest and has been guarded most deeply for centuries, here where I come from and have experienced the wealth of the people’s own fantasy, here I wanted to set a little marker precisely for the anonymous power of the word, not of a single myth, not of a single body of myth, for the Edda’s, the heroes’ tales, yes perhaps to a particular degree the Kalevala’s myths have inspired me in the same way as the myth which is created among the story-happy people today, abundantly and fruitfully.89

Jorn refers here to the mythmaking potential of folktales, ballads, poetry, literature, and all forms of cultural expression. In the “Silent Myth” images and in numerous semi-abstract paintings before and after them, Jorn makes a monument to the universal creative force which he here calls the “anonymous power of words”—not just myths as we know them today, as a realm relegated to entertainment, children’s stories, and ethnography. While the “Silent Myth” project has a specific relationship to Jorn’s Danish homeland, his approach to myth as a whole was not limited to Scandinavian sources as is commonly assumed.

According to Atkins, the series was “a heroic but futile attempt to call up and banish the crowded and burdensome images from Nordic myth, which had become a personal obsession.”90 Yet far from an attempt to dissociate himself from myth, the series was a major pictorial statement that visual mythmaking is a creative process that takes precedence over narrative storytelling. Jorn stated in his 1953 dedication speech that, “I have used the word silent myths [...] because of the personal reason that I believe visual art’s relationship to mythic formation should be silent, that is not illustrating.”91
The term “silent,” more than just a reflection of paint’s mute visual impact, meant the development of visual form as an equivalent to myth rather than a representation of it. On the top of a page of his sketchbook of 1951–1953, Jorn scribbled a few lines describing his interest in myth. He wrote,

Our knowledge is objective and can be preserved independently of people in books from generation to generation, but myth requires direct understanding, as a subjective inheritance. The fact that the art of writing is primary in relation to written knowledge indicates that someone must teach us the secrecy of language and writing, in order for us to liberate written knowledge.92

According to this statement, Jorn views myth as subjective and directly experienced, with an immediacy unavailable to written knowledge. Jorn does not specify whether visual representation of myth is more immediate or oral transmission is—Grundtvig’s legacy of the “living word” certainly inspired him here and it was Grundtvig who made known the strong parallels between Greek and Nordic mythology in the nineteenth century. For Jorn, visual form was always embedded within the social frameworks that fostered oral transmission anyway. Jorn implies that his concept of mythmaking brings both conversation and imagination together in a more direct and creative activity than writing. Jorn upheld the view that creativity began with images throughout his life, for example in his writings on the Scandinavian tradition of *husdrapa*. This was a practice of developing new interpretations or “captions” for an already-existing image; in other words, developing oral or written interpretations after the image.93

Jorn’s approach underscores the difference between merely illustrating myth and the more complex process of reimagining its social functions. His exploration contradicts the automatic affiliation of mythic themes with conservative politics, and supports the idea that avant-garde art revives the ancient social functions of myth. For the modern artist to take up myth as a major area of exploration meant refusing to celebrate individual expression, inserting the contemporary avant-garde into a lineage of collectivism and imaginative creation that extended back beyond the origins of modernism, over the full duration of human existence. Jorn’s approach to myth explores the irrational imagination as a primary wellspring of creativity, but one that always develops in dialogue with a larger cultural archive of imagery handed down over the centuries and passed from culture to culture, taking root in unique ways in different contexts. It investigates symbols that structure our relationship to the perceptual world in much the same way art does, actively inspiring and shaping experience, identity, and understanding in everyday life.

Jorn’s investigation of myth in the “Silent Myth” cycle thus revisits the fundamental conception of singular creativity in a collective context that manifested as an engagement with popular imagery at Bregnerød, and with children’s art in the Hjortøgade Kindergarten. He investigated myth in direct response to the writing on myth by modern Scandinavian writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to understand its unique bearing...
on the modern society of his homeland; yet as with his use of communal images in Helhesten and Cobra, Jorn’s reinvention of tradition was ultimately international in outlook. The ceramics he produced in Denmark and Italy in the 1950s would further develop Jorn’s understanding of the relationship of local tradition to international modernism, and personal to collective expression. His work profoundly demonstrates that the terms “personal” and “collective” are only meaningful in relationship to each other.

Notes


10. Baumeister, Fraternité Avant Tout, 42.


16. The kindergarten participated in a particularly Danish blend of socialist reformism known since the 1920s as kulturradikalisme (cultural radicalism), a major tenet of which was a foregrounding of education, with a new emphasis on children following their own interests. Sigsgaard was also the author of an internationally known children’s book, *Palle alene i verden* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1942). On the new importance of children’s books for the Danish Left in the 1930s and 1940s, see Morten Thing, *Kommunismens Kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918–1960* (Århus: Tiderne Skifter, 1993), vol. 1, 510–14.


20. Winther, statement of December 7, 1944, quoted in Andersen, *Jorn på væggen*, 14. A teacher confirmed this sentiment to me in 2003, observing that by far the most popular mural was the recent addition painted by some of the parents, depicting a mother and child in an idealized landscape in a much more representational style.


37. Jorn’s publications, from his earliest texts to posthumous translations and reprints, are listed in Per Hofman Hansen, *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter / A Bibliography of Asger Jorn’s Writings* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1988).


41. Jorn would have been familiar with Surrealist architectural theories in part through his friendship with Matta. See Pezolet, “Bauhaus Ideas,” 93–94.


47. Ibid., 203.


billedbibel i kalkmalerier (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1947), 180. Broby Johansen was a socialist critic and popular art writer whose books strongly influenced Jorn’s theories about the popular dissemination of artistic imagery.

52. The building was dismantled in 1969, but a group spearheaded by the writer Virtus Schade managed to save the ceiling. See the Danish website for the “Cobra Museum” at Sophienholm, http://www.cobramuseum.dk/index.html (accessed August 30, 2012).


60. Lambert, Cobra, 107.


63. Quoted in Andersen, Asger Jorn: en biografi, vol. 1, 199.


68. See Asger Jorns tegninger, (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1983), 136–43.


70. See, for example, Melmoth II (oil on canvas, 1955) in Gether, Hovdenakk, and Høholt, Asger Jorn (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 2002), 102.


73. Andersen, Asger Jorn: en biografi, vol. 1, 236; Atkins and Andersen, Jorn in Scandinavia, 87, 91, Pl. 84.

74. Quoted in Jordahn, Hellere en elskelig djævel end en uduelig gud, n.p.

75. The second version, in the Statens Museum for Kunst, retains the basic composition worked out in the first version, but appears more painterly. According to Atkins, there was another version (referred to as IIA), now missing. Atkins and Andersen, Jorn in Scandinavia, 78–79.


77. Quoted in Jordahn, Hellere en elskelig djævel end en uduelig gud, n.p.

78. Jorn, discussion of Livshjulet I, quoted in ibid.


81. On Jorn’s concept of “triolectics,” see Shield, Comparative Vandalism, passim.


84. Poul Pedersen recalls that Jorn turned to the traditional format of sketches for this series although he had been working mostly spontaneously in the Cobra period. Poul Pedersen, “Asger Jorn,” in Jorn for the People, ed. Erik Steffensen (Aalborg: Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, 1997), 54.


92. Quoted in ibid.

In 1958, the Statsgymnasium (public high school) in Aarhus, Denmark, opened to the public. Its architects, Arne Gravers Nielsen and Johan Richter, designed a cutting-edge Functionalist building of glass, limestone, and aluminum (Fig. 3.1). They were inspired by the elegant open-plan architecture of Mies Van der Rohe, in particular the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago.\footnote{1} The Statsgymnasium features a single story on a large platform set into a sloping hillside, with classrooms surrounding an auditorium and open central courtyard. The entrance staircase leads to a wide hallway at the far left side of the building’s southern façade. Rational, ordered, rectilinear, Apollonian, the building stands for everything Asger Jorn critiqued in architecture: geometries so harmonious and restrained that they become almost lifeless; the aesthetic celebration of structure and engineering that rejects almost anything decorative, organic, or irregular. The architects made some attempt to make the Statsgymnasium more personal, designing low ceilings and shorter hallways to try to counter its monumentality. And certain details of the building convey a non-functional aesthetic elegance that recalls the work of Mies van der Rohe, such as the Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 to which the Statsgymnasium has been compared.\footnote{2} For example, the striking striped pattern of the black and white limestone paving stones in the entrance hall, inspired by the floor of the Århus Domkirke, appears both elegant and playful. Yet the design still excludes all explicitly irrational or organic elements, such as color, texture, and biomorphic form. Jorn could not counter the impersonality of the building design, but he could attempt to make such expressive elements a permanent part of its spatial experience.

After his mural experiments of the 1940s, and given his enthusiasm for the ceramic techniques he was exploring in Italy in the 1950s, he worked for years to secure a monumental public commission that would allow him to put his ideals of art working in dialogue with architecture into practice. When he was finally commissioned by the national Danish Art Foundation (Statens Kunstfond) in 1958 to decorate one of the high school’s interior walls with a piece of mural art, after years of negotiation and resistance, it was the
challenge that attracted him, as well as the chance to counter an impersonal aesthetic with an unruly, expressive art (Color Plate 6).

His first meeting with the architects who had just won the commission to build the Statsgymnasium, in the winter of 1954–1955, resulted in skepticism on both sides. When Jorn saw the architects’ plans for the building, he even suggested Richard Mortensen, his ex-Linien colleague now turned geometric-abstract painter, as a more appropriate artist. But by 1956, he had changed his mind, realizing the opportunity provided by such a large-scale public commission, and wrote back to the architects of his interest in pursuing the project. It took so long to convince the city of Århus and negotiate the terms of his commission that the building was nearly complete when the ceramic mural was finally ready to be hung. But Jorn’s friends Viggo Nielsen in the Ministry of Education and P.V. Glob, now a professor of archaeology in Århus, worked tirelessly on his behalf. It was thanks to Nielsen in particular that Jorn’s commission got the support it needed. He became secretary of the Statens Kunstfond when it was founded in 1957 to support public art projects. No less significant was the mayor’s own viewing of the “Silent Myth” murals in Silkeborg, which helped convince him to support Jorn’s work. Eventually the architects, too, kept insisting on Jorn even as the Kunstfond considered numerous other artists for the commission, resulting in a somewhat controversial, but also celebrated, double commission in ceramics and tapestry that makes the building utterly unique.

Jorn’s ceramic mural looms out of the large rectilinear hallway of the Statsgymnasium with an almost shocking material power (Color Plate 6). Its aesthetic is monumentally grotesque and seemingly primordial. Although no official title is generally used, Jorn’s friend Robert Dahlmann Olsen refers to the mural as “Den jyske myte” (Jutlandish Myth) in a 1964 text, implying its parallels to Jorn’s “Silent Myth” paintings. Its monstrous semi-figural forms recall the 1952 paintings with their mythic giants forming out of earthly material, here writ large and surging forth in three dimensions. At the public opening for the mural in 1959, the decoration was mostly praised in the Danish press. Eight thousand people came to see it in the first week. Even the architect Richter said, “Some people say we could have done without it, because the entrance hall was so nice beforehand. We don’t think so. The relief has given that gust of life, which it lacked.” The more lyrical 14-meter-long tapestry commissioned along with it was even more well received, with almost unanimous praise, when it was first unveiled in 1961 (Color Plate 8). The Danish press related it primarily to Jorn’s work, not recognizing that it was a product of his longtime collaboration with French artist Pierre Wemaëre. Yet the collaborative practices of these two murals’ production are essential aspects of their meaning and their embodiment of the ideals of singular expression in a collective context dating back to Jorn’s 1940s work. The monumental ceramic mural created by Jorn and his colleagues powerfully counters the impersonal ceramic aesthetic of the building with aleatory, vivid, and intensely materialist forms. The tapestry is perhaps
even more unprecedented in its paradoxical transformation of a traditional, painstaking, and highly hierarchical medium into an experimental and expressive mobile monument. These works modernized traditional media at a moment when their historic relevance was increasingly recognized, but they opposed the monumentality and explicit nationalism of postwar tapestry and mural art in France and Italy. At the same time, they rejected the individualist, exclusive, and professionalized rhetoric of “high” modernism through their focus on collective input into the structure and composition of the works as they were made. Both projects directly engaged Jorn’s theories of unifying art and architecture in personal, expressive forms that provided a more lively social experience in the space.

These ceramic and tapestry experiments used traditional craft media in a modern way that supported the continual creative renewal of old media in the face of the onset of what would eventually be called “new media.” Several major modern European artists, including Picasso and Miró, were attempting at the time to “modernize” the traditional decorative arts and turn them toward individual expression on a more spectacular celebrity level. While strongly inspired by those artists who were his primary aesthetic influences since the 1930s, Jorn rejected their professional virtuosity in favor of deskilled experiments that foregrounded the material quality of the media and conveyed in a relatively collective manner the singular expressions of the various people involved in their making. They deliberately embraced craft in an era of design, when prewar avant-garde experiments that once signified critical and collective practices at the Bauhaus were reformatted for the postwar economic recovery at Max Bill’s Hochschule für Gestaltung (School of Design) in Ulm. Meanwhile, the governments of Denmark and Italy where Jorn worked in the early to mid-1950s began promoting their industrial design products with great success on the international market. Instead of the rational, streamlined products of designers like Bill, Jorn explored traditions that were popular, locally specialized, messy and organic, originally anonymous, and inherently critical of the celebration of technological progress for its own sake. Jorn did not reject technology, scientific progress, or design, but he did dream of a more egalitarian society in which popular traditions were not simply swept aside, but transformed by everyday people able to express themselves in relation to their local cultural traditions.

Jorn seized the opportunity in Århus to produce not one mural but two major collaborative projects, the largest two works of his career. He drew a hard bargain with the Danish Statsfond for Kunst, insisting that they commission not only the ceramic mural he proposed to create with skilled ceramists in Liguria, but also the tapestry mural to be supervised by himself and Wemaëre in Paris. Jorn had several other ideas for the building decoration as well, including glass mosaics in the large windows, a garden labyrinth made of stone, and colored cement decorations for the building exterior. In fact, the architect Richter later avowed that they were shortsighted not to find the funds to carry these suggestions out, too. By the time the Statsfond
offered Jorn the commission in 1958, however, it was too late to make major changes to the building. It was not a perfect opportunity, then, since it failed to allow Jorn to carry out his dream of conceiving an architectural project collaboratively from the start (this was one reason he initially hesitated on the project). “If artists are to be involved in the building scheme,” he wrote in 1943, “they must be there from the start and be involved as full participants. A building that has not been finished off by artists should not be passed for use by the local Health Authority.”

Still, Jorn was able to stand firm on the inclusion of both murals, as well as his price. The two projects came to a total of 150,000 Kroner, an unheard-of sum in Denmark at the time. It financed the materials and labor of the ceramists and weavers, and the requisite travel for preparation and installation (the mural was installed with great fanfare by the Italian ceramists themselves, accompanied north on the train by a large vat of spaghetti). Stipends were set aside for Jorn and Wemaëre, but Jorn made no money on the project because he distributed the funds among a greater number of artisans than the contract specified: while it secured payment for two weavers for eight months, it took five weavers 16 months to finish *Le long voyage*. The commission would partially support two teams of artisans led by Jorn and Wemaëre in Paris and Albisola, Italy, for almost two years. The series of events that led up to these projects began with Jorn’s investigation of craft media as a new angle in his ongoing critique of Functionalism.

**Form defies Functionalism**

The Århus murals remain fascinating for the degree to which Jorn, an artist known for his chaotic expressive aesthetic, collaborated with the Miesian architects Gravers Nielsen and Richter to produce projects that may seem initially radically opposed, but are in fact complementary. His ceramic mural does not entirely negate the rational elegance of the architecture; nor did Jorn intend it to. In 1956 he wrote, “We must preserve what seems to us to be relevant material within the heritage of Functionalism.” He did not reject Functionalism out of hand but rather believed in the necessity of uniting its social goals of order, equality, harmony, and openness with the irrational desires and unpredictable elements he considered equally essential aspects of human experience. As Nicola Pezolet observes, Jorn was not anti-Functionalist but “counter-Functionalist,” a dialectical position involving not outright rejection but critique toward a new synthesis: an expressive artistic environment. Jorn recognized very early that the Functionalist aesthetic, as he had experienced it with Le Corbusier and observed its development in Scandinavia, was full of potential for developing more democratic and healthy living conditions, but he rejected its marginalization of the creative artist in favor of an aesthetic of technology. He approved of its break with the idealism of classical architecture in favor of design based on social necessity and radical change, even accepting rationalization and standardization as
long as they benefit people’s lives. As he wrote in one of his earliest critiques of Functionalism, “Om Arkitekturens Kunstneriske Muligheder” (On the Artistic Potential of Architecture): “There can be no doubt that the rationalist demands made by Functionalism are natural and life-affirming but existing alongside these are certain, on the face of it, irrational and intuitive demands.” Jorn elucidates here the aesthetic principles that would shape his work for decades:

The artistic impulse is the central locus of our imagination and intuition. It is this which unites our realities with our potential; the existential with that which does not exist; the thing that was but is no longer; that which is to come but has not yet arrived; the possible with the impossible. It is the thing which enables us, as it were, to lift ourselves above questions of time and place. This is something existentially fundamental in our nature, because it strengthens us in our will to live and create. It is art that can create, can rejuvenate us, get our inner temperature to rise. Production levels in factories rise where music is played during work time. Imagination and intuition have the potential to liberate us from the often deadening conveyor belt of life by releasing those uncontrollable urges (expressed in phrases like “paint the town red”), so they can burst out and manifest themselves in a riot of colors and tones. This is, on the one hand, a route to relaxation and release, and on the other, a means to achieve a richer and stronger life.

Jorn goes on to discuss the increasing schism that has separated architects driven by technology and disdainful of art, on the one hand, and the “Luddite” faction of those who try to resist the inevitable necessity of technological development, on the other. He concludes that neither choice is viable; the two sides must be dialectically reconciled. Engaging the social ideals of Functionalism directly, Jorn specifically protested their recuperation into a new idealism. He aimed for a contemporary synthesis of Functionalist and expressive elements that would create a richer social life.

Jorn argues, “It is a basic weakness of Functionalism that it cannot tolerate the idea of freely creative art.” In its worst iterations, Functionalism tended to celebrate standardization and technology for their own sake, imposing its aesthetic on people in a way reminiscent of the classicism it initially opposed. It became the classicism of the machine age. Just as in classical architecture, Functionalism’s claims to the democratic ideals of openness and transparency were belied by the way it mirrored the social exclusions of class society through its impersonal monumentality, celebration of technology, and disdain for people’s own irrational desires. By the time the Århus Statsgymnasium was built, artists and architects around the globe had begun to critique these dehumanizing aspects, including the Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck who designed the Cobra exhibitions in Amsterdam and Liège (neither of which Jorn saw in person). Van Eyck participated in the Team X group’s critique of Functionalist urbanism at the tenth International Congress for Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1954. This was the same year Jorn made public his polemics in Italy with the postwar designer who became internationally known for promulgating a Functionalist approach to Bauhaus-inspired design, Max Bill.
Jorn’s own theory developed through his complex dialogue with Bill. While living in Chésières, Switzerland, a spa town where he had relocated with his family in 1953 as he continued to recover from his tuberculosis, Jorn began a correspondence with Bill that quickly became polemical. Bill had enrolled at the original Bauhaus in Dessau to study architecture but, ironically considering his later direction, spent more time in the field of “free art” there, from 1927–1929. Later, he became a member of the Abstraction-Création circle of geometric-abstract artists in Paris and then founded his own Zürcher Konkreten art group in his hometown in Switzerland. After the war, he became internationally recognized for his design principle of “Die gute Form” (Good Form), the title of a 1949 design exhibition he organized for the Swiss Industries Fair in Basel. He produced simple, harmonious, archetypal modernist designs like the 1954 Ulmer hocker (Ulm stool), which could be used as a chair, a shelf, or a table; or his famous pared-down wall clock of 1957, with its numberless white face and perfectly circular chrome-plated frame. He also designed architecture, most notably the elegantly Functionalist complex for the new Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) that opened along a sloping hillside in Ulm in 1950 (buildings that surely also inspired Gravers and Richter in Denmark). Bill secured permission from Walther Gropius to model his school on the Bauhaus, leading to its informal designation as a New Bauhaus, but he modified the Bauhaus program according to the particular postwar interest in design working even more closely with industrial society. Jorn wrote to Bill inquiring about the school, excited to see a revival of the Bauhaus, where he felt that some of the most important ideas of personal expression were first developed (in the theories of Kandinsky and Klee) alongside new, equally important interpretations of the relationship of the fine arts to industrial society. Bill responded with a pamphlet on the HfG, but quickly added that the “arts are understood differently here than at the old Bauhaus.”

In return, Jorn sent Bill some issues of the Cobra journal and boldly suggested a collaboration of “free artists” with the HfG. He quickly discovered, however, that art was the last thing that interested Bill. Bill responded, “by ‘art’ we do not understand any kind of ‘self-expression,’ but rather objective art”; and the HfG was devoted instead to “design.” He suggested Jorn apply for a job at an ordinary art school and called an end to the correspondence. Jorn responded with an angry letter declaring his intentions to found his own “Imaginary Bauhaus.” Bill responded to that idea with a legal threat. In the end, the small artist’s group Jorn founded in 1954 took up the name anyway, but apparently it did not make enough of a public impact to demand any more of Bill’s time. Jorn ultimately called this short-lived group, which operated until 1957, the Mouvement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste (International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, or IMIB). Pierre Alechinsky suggested the “Imaginist” title because, he observed, it was not about an “imaginary” Bauhaus that did not exist, but rather a real intervention that celebrated the imagination. Jorn also considered the name an homage to the Swedish Imaginisterna (Imaginist) artists who had been part of Cobra; one of them,
Anders Österlin, was also a member of the IMIB. Jorn described his reactions against Bill to Italian artist Enrico Baj, who had written him in Switzerland out of interest in Cobra. As a result Jorn began an important relationship with the Arte Nucleare (“Nuclear Art”) group in Milan headed by Baj and Sergio Dangelo, and Baj also joined the IMIB.

Lacking Dotremont’s intense control and the presence of other artists with theoretical interests as developed as Jorn’s, the group was less cohesive than Cobra, and Jorn was its only consistently active member. Nevertheless, the IMIB supported the development of “free arts” alongside and in dialectical counter to the industrial design and applied art advocated by Bill. It published a journal called *Eristica*, the title of which recalls the Latin for “love of argument” as well as the Italian word *euristico* (“heuristic”), related to learning something for oneself. Jorn believed that Bill’s rejection of expressive art in favor of an aestheticized Functionalism threatened to extinguish not individual expression—the art world would see to the continued enshrinement of that—but rather the experimental attitude of new discovery that he believed was linked to creative expression on a more fundamental level.

Jorn described his intentions regarding architecture, collectivity, and expression in the texts published in *Eristica*, many of which later ended up in *Pour la forme*, Jorn’s 1958 theoretical treatise that directly responds to Bill’s 1952 book, *Form*.\(^{17}\) He writes in the article “Immagine e forma” (Image and Form) that “the Functionalists ignore the psychological function of the environment. […] The appearance of the constructions and objects that surround us and that we use has a function independent of their practical utility.”\(^{18}\) In 1954, Jorn gave a public address at the First International Congress of Industrial Design, a conference arranged along with the tenth Milan Design Triennial to discuss the social relevance of industrial design amidst the reconstruction efforts in Western Europe. Bill summarized his ideas of “good form” in the keynote address to the conference, called “Industrial Design in Society.” A lively discussion ensued afterwards, and Jorn stood up along with Lucio Fontana to publicly denounce Bill’s ideas. Bill did not respond, however, to these critiques. He was likely not present at Jorn’s talk, later published as “Contre le fonctionnalisme” (Against Functionalism). There, Jorn argues that artists fulfill an important social role complementary to designers and scientists, and a new theory must be developed to address the current situation. Jorn takes Niels Bohr’s atomic theory of complementarity as a point of departure, calling for a new aesthetic theory equivalent to recent developments in science. He states:

The task of science is to cast doubt on what we know. However, the task of art and technical theory is to cast doubt on everything we make. Scientific doubt is voiced in analysis, while artistic doubt is expressed in action. It is for us to make everything that cannot be made, to make nothing that one is required to make by tradition and dogma, to unmask the false anxieties and the false assurances, the false luxury and the false utility, and to organize within this objective the results of our experiences.\(^{19}\)
He further argues that aesthetic expression is the most human expression that exists. The question posed by artists today, then, is “how to avoid a complete automatism, a transformation of our intelligence into an instinctive and standardized reflex.”

Jorn’s speech also develops his ideas of singular as opposed to individual expression. He clarifies that the creative solution he proposes will not come by rejecting socialism or defending liberalism, an increasingly important postwar ideology in Europe and the USA. He refers to liberalism as a “dying individualism.” He critiques Max Bill’s belief that the purpose of an education is to liberate the personality, “because it is precisely the personality that is the individualistic aspect of a man.” Against what he calls “false artists” who are only interested in “exteriorizing their own desires and needs,” Jorn argues, “purely individual desires do not exist.” In this telling phrase, one of the most important theoretical declarations of his career, Jorn recognizes, long before poststructuralist theory would make the observation commonplace, the role of the collective context in developing personal motivations. Jorn’s statement fuses the Surrealist emphasis on desire with a Cobra populist consciousness. It anticipates the Situationist notion of the “spectacle,” which describes the way external images invade and shape personal consciousness. The relation of desire and expression to a collective context was a fairly radical notion for the average audience for Western art in the 1950s, an era dominated by a return to individual expressionist painting. But it was not painting that led Jorn to this realization (though he would later attempt to transform abstract painting, too, in light of its implications). He came to it by means of a more popular and, in the long history of human creation, more anonymous and collective medium: ceramics.

The turn to ceramics

A photograph from an October 1958 meeting at the architectural offices of Gravers and Richter in Århus shows Jorn presenting his two first sketches for the ceramic mural and the tapestry to representatives of the Statens Kunstfond (Fig. 3.2). In the sketches, the ceramic and tapestry murals appear equally fluid and biomorphic, each a sort of protean landscape developed through automatic drawing and spontaneous color—though the tapestry design is in fact an amalgamation of several previous textiles completed by Jorn and Wemaëre. The process of creating the ceramic mural was more unpredictable and spontaneous given the nature of the medium. It allowed for a much greater degree of material play than the tapestry, relating closely to philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s elemental theories in its embodiment of the creative interplay of water and earth, as explained below. In the early sketch, Jorn envisions the mural as a wall come to life, its bricks morphing into playful beings and arabesques, in an earthy landscape with a liquid watercolor sky.
The mural embodies Jorn’s 1954 call for a “dynamic conception of forms [...] in a state of continual transformation.” To develop the mural, he drew on his ceramic experiments since 1953 in both Denmark and Italy. These experiences prepared the ground for the 1959 mural.

Jorn had made a few ceramics during the war inspired by the sculptures in plaster, bronze, granite, and wood of his Helhøsten colleagues Ejler Bille, Robert Jacobsen, and Henry Heerup. He began actively reconsidering the social role and aesthetics of ceramics in the postwar period, however, prioritizing the medium over painting for several years in the mid-1950s. Investigating ceramics was a way of engaging with the traditional crafts of the countries where he lived, grounded in the Cobra-period understanding that local crafts embodied anonymous collective expression. Jorn experimented throughout his life with many artistic media outside the academic purview of the fine arts, including ceramics, tapestry, collage, décollage, and artist’s books, as a deliberate rejection of the increasingly specialized view of art as a discipline of high seriousness that characterized postwar abstract painting. His ceramics attempted to consciously revive local folk art traditions in spontaneous experiments created in collaboration with potters trained in traditional techniques.

He was also encouraged by the postwar turn to ceramics of the major modernist painters who inspired him, Miró and Picasso. Picasso and Miró had
each begun collaborating with local artisans in Vallauris, France and Gallifa, Spain, respectively, to produce radical innovations in traditional ceramic forms in the late 1940s. Jorn likely read about their experiments and could have seen them exhibited in Paris, where they were extensively discussed from 1946 onwards. Picasso’s almost single-handed revival of the ceramics industry in the Provençal town of Vallauris would have a major impact on Jorn’s generation of painters at a time when the continent was undergoing massive reconstruction efforts in the cities, and the recovery from wartime scarcity foregrounded the relationship of rural to urban culture.

After the emphasis on rural themes in the art and politics of the 1930s, followed by the violence of the war with its radicalization of those populist ideologies, artists were ready to reconsider the meaning of local craft traditions across Europe. Although the dual themes of the international interest in gestural painting, on the one hand, and the artistic reactions to the mass media and the spread of consumer society by the late 1950s, on the other, have overwhelmingly dominated the writing on art in this period, the revival of craft traditions had an equally major impact on artistic life in Europe at the time. Abstract painting itself rose to postwar prominence partly because of its emphasis on the hand at a time of increasing industrialization and “automation” of everyday life. Ceramics is a medium even more known for its intense materiality and connection to handmaking. Unlike abstract painting, it also tends to insist on its relationship to local tradition, while resisting any sort of homogenized, international stylistic tendency (whether academic or modernist). In fact, the very internationalism of abstract painting ultimately helped to cause the widespread perception that the medium was becoming stale and repetitive by the end of the decade.

Jorn had first studied ceramics at the local pottery studio Silkeborg Pottemageri, run by Niels Nielsen, in 1933, and decided to return to ceramics when he was inspired by the spontaneous experiments of his friend Erik Nyholm in Funder, just north of Silkeborg, in 1952. In 1953, he made a series of egg-shaped plates in Silkeborg in the pottery workshop of his old teacher from the Silkeborg Teacher’s College, O. Randlev Petersen. Through Nyholm, Jorn also met Knud Jensen, a well-known local potter in Sorring, a Danish pottery center since the eighteenth century not far from Silkeborg. There, he produced a series of ceramics in Jensen’s larger and more established workshop. Jorn secured funding for his ceramic work in Sorring from the Silkeborg Museum, which paid for Jensen to assist Jorn in the studio for a period of weeks in return for a collection of the resulting work. Jorn began by painting onto Jensen’s traditionally molded pots playful forms inspired by figures of everyday life and the curvilinear forms of Danish Jugendstil designs (Fig. 3.3). The approximately 60 vases, plates, and sculptures he produced there formed the basis of Jorn’s art collection donated to the Silkeborg Museum, a collection which he turned into the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum in 1965 (renamed the Museum Jorn in 2010).
3.3 Asger Jorn, *Untitled* vase, 1953. 77 cm high. Glazed ceramic. Museum Jorn, Silkeborg
Jorn attempted to base his work on longstanding traditions of Danish ceramics, including ancient Scandinavian clay ware, local craft traditions in Sorring, turn-of-the-century Jugendstil experiments, and the postwar revival of ceramics spearheaded by Picasso. His 1953 article “Indtryk af Silkeborgsøens pottemageri” (Impressions of the Ceramic Workshops in the Silkeborg Region) describes these inspirations. He writes of the declining pottery traditions in the Silkeborg region, where wares had become bare and functional, still taken through the countryside on horse-driven carts to be sold directly to the farmers who used them. He wonders why the area could not use artistic ceramics to expand the decorative quality of its pottery and revive tourism, as Vallauris did in France. Although Picasso produced some famous sculptural forms, such as owl figures and goat’s heads, as part of his extensive ceramic production, he made the bulk of his ceramics as Jorn did, by taking pots and plates thrown by professional ceramists in Vallauris and painting designs onto them. Picasso’s designs were based on classical Mediterranean motifs, like the nude or the satyr, in his signature spontaneous, gestural style. His folksy classical motifs look virtuosic in contrast to Jorn’s more comical, childlike, grotesque, or abstract figurative decorations. Both artists made pre-established shapes produced serially by artisans into more expressive pieces by drawing or sculpting forms on their surfaces, distorting their shapes, or both. They transformed banal or kitsch pieces—an ashtray or a decorative vase—into semi-figurative, singular pieces of folk art created by a modern artist’s playful hand. The objects’ status as folk versus high art, in fact, remains a matter of debate, as these ceramics are frequently overlooked in Jorn’s oeuvre, just as they are in Picasso’s and Miró’s.

Jorn deliberately, perhaps facetiously, regarded his ceramics as experiments in kitsch. He even lamented the fact that in the scenic lake region around Silkeborg, known for a little hill with a nineteenth-century monument known as Himmelbjerget (“Sky Mountain”) on the highest point in Denmark, no stores sold any decent ceramic souvenirs. He writes, “I sought to help out by improving the models used for the Himmelbjerget tourists and to produce myself some new models.” Jorn calls for municipal efforts to improve the artistic training of the potters and to display their wares alongside artists’ experimental ceramics in a yearly “summer attraction.” He demonstrates a sophisticated awareness of the continuing coexistence in the art world of traditional and modernist or experimental methods, and pushes adamantly for their direct interaction and mutual creative exchange. Whereas Picasso more or less stumbled upon the ceramics process when he sat down one day in 1946 to decorate some pots in a Vallauris workshop, Jorn began thinking through the social implications and meanings of ceramic decoration as an extension of his ongoing exploration of architectural decoration, making a deliberate intervention in the separation of the artistic discourses of art versus decoration, craft versus kitsch. Jorn did not, however, broach the issue of ceramic editions, which Picasso began producing based on his designs in the mid-1950s. In Picasso’s choice to turn a singular, expressive pot into editioned...
copies made more easily available on the market, another set of issues regarding originality and value come to the fore. Jorn preferred, instead, to produce one-of-a-kind works that treated ceramics as a form of sculpture, each one a unique expression.

Jorn would soon leave traditional ceramic shapes behind to develop unique forms related to his painted imagery, pushing both media in the direction of greater materiality while maintaining his old interest in popular motifs and imaginative visions. From kitsch decorations on traditional formats such as the 1953 pot in the form of a bourgeois gentleman, he moved within a few months to more grotesque and unprecedented forms that push against the ideas of beauty and good taste. Jorn took his ceramic explorations further in Italy, where he was inspired by Italian popular traditions, Futurist experiments in ceramics, and the work of postwar artists like Lucio Fontana and Giuseppe Capogrossi.

Fontana had explored ceramics since the 1930s, pushing the medium in an unprecedented direction, producing objects that revisit traditional or Fascist themes like butterflies or riders on horseback, but in forms that appear distressed and debased. Their shiny colored glazes appear oily and artificial, evoking cheap commodities as much as the Italian taste for luxury objects. Fontana’s ceramic work embraces both abstract materialism and kitsch in foregrounding the quality of clay as a raw material, and glaze as a superficial decoration. His ceramic objects and wall reliefs from the 1940s and 50s, as well as his paintings such as the “Venice” series of ca. 1961, feature what Anthony White describes as “glistening shiny surfaces which trumpet their fraudulent imitation of precious metal.” The older Italian artist befriended Jorn when he arrived in Italy in 1954 and introduced him to important contacts in the Milanese art world. Fontana even lent Jorn his own summer studio in Albisola, on the Ligurian coast, when Jorn arrived in the little seaside town with no place to sleep but a campsite. Jorn eventually managed to buy a house of his own in Albisola which, heavily decorated with murals and ceramics, remains a monument to his unique architectural theories.

Upon his arrival in Italy, Jorn could have seen a large number of wall reliefs and murals made by Fontana, who executed many public commissions at the factory of Tullio Mazzotti, known as “Tullio d’Albisola,” during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Tullio was a master ceramist who had worked with the Futurists and other ceramic artists for decades at the Fabbrica Ceramiche Mazzotti. Fontana likely inspired Jorn in his use of ceramics as a medium that cut across the boundaries of high art and kitsch, dealing with themes of luxury and beauty in order to reveal their undersides: the radically undemocratic and the grotesque. For the new Cinema Arlecchino, which opened in Milan in 1948, Fontana created a ceramic mural featuring a scene of classically-derived nudes on horseback leaping into battle, beneath icons for the sun and moon (Fig. 3.4).
The tiles are glazed in kitschy colors of pink, white, and gold, reportedly painted with phosphorescent paint to make the entire surface glow in the darkened theater, where it is situated directly underneath the film screen. Its surface undulates in and out along a long ribbon-like composition, suggesting a contrast between the physical presence of the mural and the flickering light of the screen, as shocking today as it must have been novel in 1949.32 Such works exemplify the way, as White describes, Fontana “repudiated the […] antithetical opposition of avant-garde and kitsch […] to promote a more profoundly dialectical, or nonidentical, understanding, one which refused to accept the stability of either term in the opposition, thereby disallowing any false reconciliation or mastery.”33 Jorn’s ceramics would similarly cut across the avant-garde / kitsch divide. The Århus mural incorporates the irregular cut of the tiles utilized by Fontana in his reliefs, exaggerating it even further in a linear network of cuts that produces a netlike organic grid across the surface. Jorn eschews the luscious frosted textures and shines of Fontana’s glazes and his classical or academic subject matter, though, in favor of monstrous and folkloric imagery and rough glazes that emphasize the material grotesqueness of the ceramic surface.

The International Ceramics Congresses

Jorn developed his ceramic experiments in the collective context of the Ceramics Congresses he organized in 1954 and 1955. He coordinated the first IMIB “Incontro internazionale della ceramica” (International Ceramics
Congress) in Albisola in August 1954, less than four months after arriving in Italy with his family. In June 1954 he ran into his old friends Appel and Matta in Rome at an exhibition of his work organized by Baj at Galleria Asterisco, and conceived the idea of an international artists’ conference in Albisola. He convinced Tullio d’Albisola to allow the assembled artists the use of his studio to produce ceramic works, but he wanted to invite critics and theorists as well as artists. He wrote to Alechinsky of his plans to invite the two major French critics of Informel and Tachisme, Michel Tapié and Charles Estienne. Tapié had included Jorn’s work in a group exhibition in Rome in 1953 and was a champion of Appel’s work among other ex-Cobra artists; Estienne had written the introduction for the 1951 Cobra exhibition catalogue in Liège. When Alechinsky pointed out that the two rivals would never appear together at the same conference, Jorn invited Edouard Jaguer instead. Jaguer produced a ceramic vase covered in a text of dedication to the festive events of the Congress, signed by all its participants. It reads in part: “Here, in Albisola, we create together, in the earth of the Forest, a new conception of art.” Similarly, while he wanted to invite Constant, Constant would not appear with Corneille, so the artists Appel and Corneille were present (Constant would take part in Jorn’s 1956 conference in Alba). The final group that assembled in August 1954 included Appel, Corneille, Jaguer, Baj, Dangelo, Fontana, Matta, a few other artists and poets Jorn had recently met in Italy, and some of the Italian artists who worked at Tullio’s studio: Emilio Scanavino, Agenore Fabbri and Franco Garelli. At the time Jorn referred to this workshop as a “repetition” of the 1949 group congress in Bregnerød. He writes that, while in 1949 they made collective wall decorations, “in Albisola we left our traces in clay.”

Tullio and Fontana helped organize an exhibition of a selection of the work produced in the first Ceramics Congress at the 1954 Milan Triennial, after Fontana was impressed by the works produced by Baj, Scanavino, Jorn and the other foreign artists. Jorn protested vehemently that the exhibition was a failure, however, despite its positive impact on Italian critics and gallerists who visited the Triennial. He wrote to Fontana that the works were poorly chosen by Tullio and framed merely as a group of childlike experiments from the Mazzotti workshop, lacking the necessary contextualization of the work as an “ideological exhibition;” in other words, a pointed critique of postwar design culture exemplified by Bill. More memorable was the outdoor exhibition of the work of Appel, Corneille, Jorn, and Matta arranged by Tullio in a public square next to his Fabbrica Mazzotti the following summer, images of which Jorn published in Eristica and later Pour la forme. The outdoor exhibition gave proper prominence, in Jorn’s view, to the wall reliefs he considered especially important (Fig. 3.5).

These were trial works for the larger Århus mural, with lines deeply etched into the clay after earlier drawings and lithographs. Many of the same works were exhibited at the Kunstindustrimuseum in Copenhagen in 1955. The show did not garner much attention in Denmark, but Jorn’s old Helhøsten colleague,
the architect Robert Dahlmann Olsen, praised the works’ spontaneity and expressive possibilities. He writes: “the three large flat reliefs are proof of the rich possibilities that lie in the pictorial unfolding of a large surface, the fantastic space, the fantastic house, the temple.”

The wider Danish public would have to wait until the Statsgymnasium opening in 1959 to appreciate the full effect of Jorn’s ceramic decorations.

In August 1955, the second Ceramics Congress took place in the nearby town of Alba, home of Giuseppe “Pinot” Gallizio, whom Jorn had met along with the philosophy student Piero Simondo in a bar in Albisola, during one of his frequent spirited discussions about art and science. Gallizio was a unique self-described “chemist-botanist-archaeologist” who became an artist in the 1950s. His pharmaceutical laboratory and studio, in the large space of an old seventeenth-century monastery, allowed the IMIB to call it the “Imaginist laboratory” of art (it would become a “Situationist laboratory” upon the founding of the Situationist International in 1957). After the Congress in Alba, Jorn compared the social role of the avant-garde to scientific research, except that its experiments operate with unlimited potential purposes rather than preconceived practical applications: “the fine arts […] can no longer be understood as the final decorations on the façade, as the topping of the cake,
but as the first in itself meaningless step toward a new cultural and economic situation.” Art is not, Jorn claims, a mere imitation of the newest science, but a “parallel operation taking us, the human, as its object of attention.” Jorn’s critique may have been aimed at not only the tendency of Functionalism to surrender art to technology, but also the claims by Informel painters to represent new developments in atomic physics. Rather than science for its own sake, the human and the social were always the starting point for Jorn.

The international group of artists, philosophers, curators, and musicians gathered around Jorn in 1955–1956 included not only the veterans of 1954 Matta, Baj, Appel, and the rest, but also Constant, Alechinsky, Dotremont, Nycholm, Wifredo Lam, architect Ettore Sottsass, musician Walter Olmo, Stedelijk Museum director Willem Sandberg, gallerists Carlo Cardozzo from Milan and Otto van de Loo from Munich, and collector Paolo Marinotti. This time around, Jorn also invited a group of children, including his own family, to decorate dozens of ceramic plates and published images of them in *Eristica*. The following year, 1956, he opened the “First World Congress of Free Artists,” where the Nuclear artists and the IMIB met the Parisian Lettrist International, represented by Gil Wolman. Gallizio would produce spontaneous “Pittura industriale” (Industrial paintings) by the meter from 1957 to 1959 with a never-ending series of visiting artists including Jorn, Appel, Constant, his son Giorgio Gallizio, the young painters Jacqueline de Jong and Soshana Afroyim, and the German SPUR artists Heimrad Prem, E.R. Nele, Hans-Peter Zimmer, Helmut Sturm, and Erwin Eisch. Out of this “enormous and unknown chemical reaction,” as Gallizio later described the events of 1956, Jorn used his new knowledge of ceramics to create a new attack on modern painting. Alongside Gallizio, he produced unprecedented, hybrid works that fused traditional ceramic methods with new industrial materials.

Pictures of Gallizio’s yard in Alba show Jorn using hot tar or a blowtorch to produce paintings laid out serially on a long table as if on an assembly line. In the Experimental Laboratory, Jorn broke down the material divide between painting and the “decorative arts” by bringing new materials such as metallic powder and industrial paint into his painting. These were attacks on painting in the name of material chaos, and direct comments on the spread of consumer goods and the uncritical celebration of new technologies in postwar society. A key series of small but fascinating works, done for an exhibition at Galerie Birch in Copenhagen in 1955, was pointedly called, “Letsindige Billeder” (Frivolous Pictures). To make them, Jorn utilized metallic sand and asphalt dust he brought north to Copenhagen from Albisola. He sprinkled the dust into the oil paint to achieve encrusted surfaces, literalizations of the actual ground made into a pictorial ground, as in *Tele-visioner* (Fig. 3.6).

Here, a monstrous image seems to form out of the heterogeneous materials themselves. A small television-box on the left becomes a grotesque personage, spewing radiation in the form of a splotch of red paint with the head of a rabbit-eared “figure.” Its body is formed from sloppy yellow, blue,
3.6 Asger Jorn, *Tele-visioner (Tele-visions)*, 1955. “Letsindige billeder (Frivolous Pictures),” No. 7. Oil and asphalt on canvas. 54.2 × 47 cm. KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg.
and white segments encircled by graffiti-like outlines carved into the asphalt with the end of the brush. The implication is that the television spews out toxic visions, replacing the viewer’s own imagination with lighthearted frivolities. In *Tele-visions*, the textural immediacy of the asphalt impedes the perspectival trajectory our vision. The work presents a paradox, suggesting visions extending into space only to stop us short at the picture’s surface. The “Frivolous Pictures” cross popular references to space travel and new commodities like the television with the ponderous use of material in avant-garde painting like that of Dubuffet.

Both Jorn and Baj’s painting at the time took a pointed interest in science fiction B-movies and pulp fiction, which had also inspired Fontana to reference space travel in his “Spatialist” manifestoes. The subject of visions radiating out into space like cosmic rays recalls Fontana’s discourse of the “conquest of space” as well as Baj’s own explorations of everyday subjects and kitsch. Fontana’s “Spatial Manifesto” of 1948 declared: “We will transmit, by radiotelevision, artistic expressions of a new type.” Fontana would fulfill his own prophecy by creating experimental works involving projections, fluorescent lights, and blacklight environments, as well as the punctured and slashed canvases for which he became famous in the mid-1950s. To Fontana, television signified the power to voyage in space and time, transporting the visions of the imagination. Baj, on the other hand, was much more skeptical of new technologies. He was inclined to see the television as a vehicle of spectacular jargon, inundating viewers with meaningless messages. He portrayed the television set in his paintings with a materialist kitschiness and irony very similar to Jorn’s, indicating how close their artistic dialogue was at the time.

Jorn’s use of everyday material as the ground of painting also recalls Jean Dubuffet’s *haute pâte* (“thick paste”) works of a few years earlier. Jorn identifies Dubuffet as one of the key new French painters in a manuscript of 1951, the year Dubuffet exhibited the “Corps des dames” (Bodies of Ladies) series at René Drouin’s Galerie Rive Gauche. Drouin introduced Jorn to his work in fall 1946. In the late 1950s the two artists would meet and become good friends. Jorn combines the influence of Dubuffet’s paste-like surfaces and figural distortions with his own experience in ceramics to foreground the material realities of dirt and matter in tension with representation. Baj also produced monstrous figures made of paint dripped and slathered onto the pictorial surface using a similarly viscous combination of materials he called *acqua pesante* (“heavy water”). According to Arturo Schwartz, the elegance of Baj’s formal preoccupations of the early 1950s turned to more “expressionist” and “barbaric” themes after contact with Jorn. Like the Dubuffet and Baj works, Jorn’s painting places a vertical splatter of textured material in place of a window into space, the traditional metaphor for painting since the Renaissance. Where the system of perspective implied a rational control over space by an all-seeing gaze, the “matièriste” (matterist) approach of Dubuffet, Baj, and Jorn sets a wall of relatively unstructured matter in the place of
painting’s traditional window, thus confounding the very idea of rational control. Jorn proclaimed in a 1953 interview that “one can get cramps from seeing a picture,” a direct and uncontrollable physical reaction suggested by the scatological colors and themes of his mid-1950s paintings. Tele-visions conveys a comic horror at the dissolution of the human figure in the face of technology come to life. Jorn’s experiments with the raw matter of clay evidently inspired him to put into action what he had theorized years earlier in the Cobra period, that art must be immediate and based on the sensory experience of material reality. He writes, for example, in the 1948 text for Magi og skønne kunster: “The direct sensation, the materialistic experience, is as we have already shown, the direct sensual touching of things oneself, the feeling of letting food go by your taste buds and become absorbed in your body, of touching a woman’s skin, of seeing colored objects.” The asphalt and tar of Jorn’s figure references the horizontal surface of the earth, defying the transcendent function of traditional painting. The vertical surface of vision becomes a site of polemical struggle between matter and vision.

It was no accident that Jorn’s experimentation with material excess appeared at this moment, as the IMIB mounted its public attack on the culture of commodified design that accompanied the postwar boom of the late 1950s. This attack on the figure by referencing decomposition was another form of critical opposition to the way postwar European societies such as Italy officially promoted design as the quintessential aesthetic discourse connecting rational planning to exuberant consumption. This manner of painting replaced crass economic materialism in the sense of desire for possessions with a Marxist-inspired materialism manifesting as the literal materials of painting. It rejected not just the metaphysical ideals of painting, but also the modern postwar consumer who sought perfection in the world of good design. The “Frivolous Pictures” are less about individual expression than distinctly social meanings, relating painting explicitly to the decorative arts in an ironic parody of technology and high design.

The Århus ceramic mural

The 1959 ceramic mural magnified these qualities of material presence in tension with the formation of imagery to an unprecedented public scale, conveying imaginative visions with a paradoxically impressive material gravity. The Århus mural was the largest mural Jorn ever produced and surely one of the largest ceramic murals in the world. At 3 × 27 meters, made of 1,200 individual hand-cut tiles, and weighing about eight tons, its powerful and visceral presence evokes not so much “mythic” imagery as grotesque semi-abstract forms. It thematizes a material struggle at once aleatory and violent. Jorn referred to it as an expression of primordial powers or urkraften, related to the Nordic culture’s survival despite its marginalization by Roman and post-classical culture. The amorphous quality of the figures may have
stood in Jorn’s mind for the way Nordic culture, consistently marginalized or overlooked, remained relatively unknown and mysterious in the mainstream understanding of high culture, a situation he later sought to remedy with his “Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism” in the 1960s.

The mural was produced in the workshop of Eliseo Salino in Albisola, in four months in the summer of 1959. Working in three large sections, one at a time, Salino and his colleagues first unfolded the initial sheet of monumental clay, 7–8 cm thick, a critical stage that had to be done by specialists to prevent any cracking or potentially explosive air bubbles. Jorn then applied an unusually wide range of experimental techniques to create the imagery. He scraped, molded, poked, and incised the imagery into the wet clay, later brushing, slopping, and splashing on layers of glaze and embedding local glass into coral-like depressions. The Italian ceramists aided Jorn at every stage (Fig. 3.7).

One day, when he needed to get his motor scooter out of the yard, he famously drove over the wet clay a few times, leaving tire marks in the right-hand section (Fig. 3.8). This apparent attack on the picture plane, at once destructive and ludicrous, produced much commentary in the Danish press after the opening in Århus. The gesture can be read as a pastiche of...
3.8 Ugo Morabito, photograph of Asger Jorn driving a scooter across the right-hand section of the ceramic mural, with Eliseo Salino, Albisola, June, 1959. Foto Lux (Savona, Italy)
Pollock’s drip painting on the floor or a mechanized parody of the handmade gesture. For many years, people believed that the scooter made the patterned marks on the right-hand section of the mural, but photographer Lars Bay recently identified that the scooter marks are actually barely visible in the finished mural.\textsuperscript{55}

The larger, more geometric patterns were made using the edges of ordinary building bricks. Such designs are characteristic of ceramic designs from diverse ancient cultures, and were referenced in the Jugendstil ceramics of Thorvald Bindesbøll and Axel Salto, whose work was well known in Denmark in the early twentieth century. Bindesbøll used earthenware, a coarser material than stoneware or porcelain, that gave his works a more expressive and striking, earthy appearance, while Salto produced geometric designs recalling ancient Scandinavian pottery.\textsuperscript{56} Jorn’s work was a conscious homage to Jugendstil and Art Nouveau decorations that fused the industrial with the organic. Jorn greatly appreciated the expressive and unpredictable architectural spaces of Art Nouveau exemplified in Gaudi’s Casa Milà, reproduced in one of his early articles on architecture alongside images of the imaginative cement figures Max Ernst made in the 1930s to decorate the walls of his house in Saint-Martin d’Ardeche.\textsuperscript{57} Jorn’s murals explicitly revive the turn-of-the-century interpretation of the decorative environment as a critique of modern life. The organic forms of Art Nouveau and Jugendstil related to a broader conception of the interior as a site of private refuge and psychological respite from the increasing pace and rational demands of society, in an age when the anxiety of modern existence was commonly diagnosed as “neurasthenia.”\textsuperscript{58}

For Jorn, the decorative environment was less a personal refuge to nurture the psyche in private than a radical reenvisioning of public and private space—a reconfiguring of public experience along radically personal, expressive lines. His mural draws both on the history of expressive abstraction and the traditions of decoration in various cultures, such as the ancient Mediterranean ceramic designs based on sea life that also strongly influenced Picasso, or the significance of the humble 	extit{mursten} (brick) in traditional Danish architecture. At the same time, the mural pushes public decoration to its aesthetic limit, almost violently refusing good taste and any traditional definition of beauty, evoking instead the quirkiness of folk art and the almost excessive organicism of Jugendstil.

Jorn’s mural radically rejects the machine aesthetic of the Cubists Léger and Le Corbusier, nowhere present in his cacophonous, chaotic approach to ceramic form. As in Jorn’s prior artistic collaborations, this expression was one of personal creation in a social context to produce a work that welcomes diverse interpretations, as opposed to an individual creation aimed at a standardized collective reception, such as that of Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux in 1937. The Pavillon’s plethora of clear, diagrammatic images proclaimed a socialist society based around the rational organization of roles, needs, and desires liberated by the role of machines.\textsuperscript{59} Jorn’s ceramic mural is the public culmination of his reaction against the experience of working on Le Corbusier’s project, his attempt to give form to
the irrational and unpredictable “needs” that he felt the Functionalists, for all their commendable attempts at progressive design, overlooked. Ceramics is a much more materially intense medium than painting, with its intimate link to the pleasure and freedom of molding clay by hand. Jorn and his colleagues in Albisola used it to produce a work as far from ordered, premeditated, geometric clarity as the material could go.

Still, Jorn appreciated Léger and Le Corbusier’s early recognition of the important social role of aesthetic elements such as color in architecture, even if he did not agree with the way they used it. Both Léger and Jorn seem to have been directly inspired by the materialist philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, the influential French philosopher of science and poetic essayist. In “Ansigt til Ansigt” (Face to Face), Jorn approvingly quotes Léger’s statement, which echoes Bachelard’s elemental theories, that “color is a vital necessity. It is primary matter, like water or fire.” Léger was referring to the way modernist architects used single-colored walls as a way to humanize rational constructivist design. Instead of a solid plane, the use of color in the Århus mural suggests a more radical materialism by means of a riot of colors with heterogeneous qualities of shine and translucence embodied in irregular, three-dimensional form. Jorn’s mural uses materials to suggest imaginative visions, relating to Bachelard’s understanding of the imaginative potential of elemental matter suggested by Léger. The idea of an “Imaginist” Bauhaus itself was a fusion of Cobra’s materialism with the primacy of imagination, directly recalling Bachelard’s notion of “material imagination,” the creation of artistic forms to provoke the imagination.

Dotremont first encountered Bachelard in 1941, and the Belgian Cobra artists attended Bachelard’s lectures in Paris. They avidly discussed his books on the imagination including Le psychanalyse du feu (The Psychoanalysis of Fire, 1938) and L’eau et les rêves (Water and Dreams, 1942). Bachelard’s theory recognizes that the free imagination develops only in dialogue with the material conditions of existence, and that the primal elements that have been theorized for centuries by human culture represent or even call forth the original creative power of the imagination. As Mary McAllester Jones observes, Bachelard’s readings of poetry dwell on images, rather than ideas: “he reads material and dynamic images, neither perceptual nor rational, nor expressive of lived experience, images which are written, which are in and through language.” The Cobra artists responded to his open-ended readings of poetic imagery in their attempts to connect the material specificity of artistic practices to the political materialism of communism. As Bachelard describes in relation to poetry, “it would seem that the reader is called upon to continue the writer’s images, he is aware of being in a state of open imagination.” The intensely physical experience of Cobra artworks similarly demands that viewers take an active imaginative role. Jorn later quoted Bachelard’s statement that, “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.” Bachelard’s emphasis on the
process of imagination and its tendency to deform images as much as form them powerfully describes Jorn’s ceramic reliefs.

The qualities of openness and materiality are epitomized in Jorn’s ceramic mural, where the imagery seems to form and dissolve back into raw elements of earth, water, and color before our eyes. Ceramics, in the Bachelardian view, exemplify what he describes as a paste (la pâte), an elemental combination of water and earth in which both are suspended in interaction. “Paste is […] the basic component of materiality,” Bachelard writes. “The very notion of matter is, I think, closely bound up with it.” In L’eau et les rêves (Water and Dreams), he describes pâte as a dynamic material, a “medium of energy and no longer merely of form.” He privileges the working of clay as the closest artistic process to the imagination, writing that in contrast to the sculptor in marble, who produces form by eliminating the formless, “the modeler before his clay block finds form by deforming, by a dreamy evolution of the amorphous. The modeler is the one nearest to the inner dream, to the vegetating dream.”

Bachelard later praised the broader turn of French postwar artists to ceramics in the 1950s in an article on Marc Chagall, writing: “What a wonderful age we live in, where great painters become ceramists and potters. Here they are, cooking colors. With fire, they make light. They learn chemistry with their eyes; as to matter itself, they want it to react, for the pleasure of seeing.”

The Århus mural foregrounds the Bachelardian theory of elemental matter in the form of the Venetian glass that transforms water, and the almost volcanic surging of its hardened surface that evokes fire (Color Plate 9). Jorn also took inspiration from Lucio Fontana’s use of Venetian glass as a raw material for ceramic decoration, transforming a medium associated with refined beauty into a celebration of roughness and imperfection. The Århus mural sets glass into play with various colored glazes, delighting in their sometimes unpredictable melting and craquelure in the finished work. The liquidity of the glass also develops further the sea creature theme expressed in the mural’s grotesque semi-figurative imagery. The undersea imagery relates directly to the form of ceramic clay as well as glazes, in that Jorn’s semi-abstract creatures are permanently embedded in a crude state of their originally liquid materials. The material liquidity of paint or ceramic glaze in Jorn’s work recalls a sort of primordial soup, symbolic of sheer creative potential. The mural seems to immerse the viewer in an overtly raw and visceral vision of creativity as a dialogic response to the cool restraint of the architecture, complementing its austerity without negating it completely.

The mural dramatically exemplifies Jorn’s aesthetic principles of the late 1950s—that the monstrous, the ugly, and the materially excessive signify uniqueness and spontaneity as an antidote to the cool elegance of Functionalist design. In explaining the new artistic principle of the IMIB, Jorn wrote: “Where the normal, orderly, and masterly is pretty, so the characteristically rare, remarkable, and singular must be ugly. Long live ugliness, which creates beauty. Without ugliness prettiness does not exist, only obviousness, indifference, and boredom. The unaesthetic is not the ugly but the boring.” The singularity of the ugly was not, however, linked to the greatness of an
individual artist, but rather to a creative impulse present everywhere, which could be cultivated in a collective creative environment. For Jorn, ugliness signified singularity, the expression of the personal apart from any potential commercial application. It also rejected the streamlined sophistication of postwar design showcased in the Milan Triennials. He championed the grotesque and the ugly as markers of the new and the unknown, expressions of which could only develop in a context of mutual creative support.

In a 1955 account of the first Albisola Congress, Jorn wrote that personal expression could only unfold in a collective context that supported such aesthetic experiments that would redefine beauty and ugliness. Jorn described the meeting in Albisola as a “step toward the development of a […] free artistic methodology organized under the name Mouvement Internationale pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste, turned against architectonic rationalism and empiricism.”

The notion of a “free artistic methodology” here does not mean the high modernist conception of individual expression. It is a typically Jornian paradox: how could a “methodology” be “free”? It relates to Jorn’s dialogic approach to what could be termed “singular-collective expression.” A methodology of artistic freedom requires a collective context out of which personal expression can develop. As his Italian colleague Piero Simondo later observed about his experience at the Ceramics Congresses: “We worked together but each one on his own. We did not work in collaboration for a common project.”

Drawing on his experiences in collaborative expression in Helhesten and Cobra, Jorn proclaimed: “the free artist is a professional amateur.”

The social message of Jorn’s work is not one of easy harmony or utopianism. Instead, it captures the real complexity of the antagonistic and contradictory attitudes present in any vibrant democratic society. As part of his investigation of the decorative arts, Jorn became interested in the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, the formal precursor to Jugendstil. Both movements embraced organic form and believed it to exemplify principles extending beyond the aesthetic into the social—although Arts and Crafts, unlike Jugendstil, explicitly rejected machine technology. Jorn remarked to the First World Congress of Free Artists in 1956 that “Ruskin and Morris knew that what transforms thought is transformation of life itself through ‘an ideal and utopian sociability.’”

Jorn approved of Ruskin’s ideas of the social and expressive possibilities in architecture and his enthusiasm for the Gothic style. He also agreed with the socialist critique inherent in British Arts and Crafts and its emphasis on natural forms as a rejection of historical revival styles. However, he opposed Ruskin’s spiritualism and his moralizing tone. Even as he explains in Pour la forme why Ruskin and Morris are important precursors for his work, Jorn objects to Ruskin’s resistance to new technology and to his understanding that there is only one way to make great art. Where Ruskin accuses the art of his day of national and moral degeneracy, Jorn suggests that art has a social power that should not be underestimated, a potential to “experiment with a devaluation of the national and moral conventions [in order] to make progress in the moral and national domain.”
Far from harmonious, Jorn’s mural operates through the antagonism of form struggling to appear in a viscous material, and the clash of its organic aesthetic with the surrounding architecture. Yet it also allows for a transformation to happen in the viewer, who becomes accustomed to its singular language. Initial perceptions of ugliness and dissonance can become beauty and harmony over time spent with the mural. New reactions continually develop upon close study of the mural, just as they do in Jorn’s painting. Its simultaneous creation and dissolution of form into material destabilizes our sensory experience as viewers: we struggle to read figures in the amorphous surface, perhaps hesitating to step too close, lest we be accosted by the roiling surface. These forms symbolize openness to continual evolution and contradiction in the very conception of the aesthetic, and there is a message about social acceptance embedded within them.

The overwhelming scale of the mural, with its myriad smaller marks and effects, also foregrounds the dialogic origins of this work through the engagement of multiple sets of eyes, minds, and hands. The individual dissolves into the singular as our eyes follow the gouged or stamped traces of each mark pressed into the clay. The anonymity of these marks registers the singular presence as opposed to the individual gesture. The mural’s surface records collective art-making as a manifestation of Jean-Luc Nancy’s “being-singular-plural.” Nancy’s terminology is essential to comprehend the way collectivism and personal expression become mutually generative in Jorn’s work. While in the Cobra congress at Bregnerød in 1949, singular expression developed in painted murals setting each artist’s production into a collective aesthetic dialogue, at Århus the expression of the various contributors is more subtle, not only involving direct physical additions to the surface but also including the intangible advice given to Jorn about materials or the process of firing the tiles. The work of each hand, artist or artisan, amateur or professional, contributed uncountable expressions at each stage of an elaborate and complex process of molding, stamping, incising, glazing, and firing.

The mural was truly an expression of all the participants involved, a monumental and collective project that redefines expression itself as something collective, rather than individual. By all accounts, a greater degree of collaboration involving the spontaneous input of everyone present manifested in the Albisola workshop under Jorn’s direction than in comparable ceramic projects at the time. A similarly close collaboration had perhaps existed on a smaller scale between Miró and the ceramist Llorens Artigas in the ceramic objects they produced together starting in 1946. Miró called their process “completely collective work,” in which “all individual contribution ceased to exist.” In larger ceramic murals, however, Miró treated the design process much more like individual expression. In the two large-scale ceramic murals commissioned for the UNESCO building in Paris in 1959 (Fig. 3.9), for example, he exchanged the emphasis on collaboration for a monumental statement about modernist personal expression.
After finishing the tiles in the wall, Artigas was taken completely by surprise as he watched Miró draw shapes up to 20 feet long in one fell swoop using a large palm-fiber besom on the freshly fired tiles. Even if the imagery was drawn from traditional motifs of stars and ships, Miró’s spontaneous monumental drawing marked the wall as a personal statement by a great individual painter. It treated the relatively flat ceramic surface as a modernist canvas. The Århus mural, by contrast, made full use of the potential of ceramics as Jorn theorized it: ceramics as an anonymous, collective medium shaped as much by its own inherent materiality as by spontaneous modern expression. These concerns manifested equally, but in a different way, in the process of weaving the tapestry.

Tapestry: Modernity and tradition

The initial design for the Århus tapestry that Jorn presented to the Århus Kommune along with the ceramic sketch in 1958 is clearly something he threw together based on earlier tapestries made with Wemaëre, including Le Retour (The Return) and the L’Oiseau dans le fôret (The Bird in the Forest) of 1947–1948 (Fig. 3.10). Wemaëre, a modernist painter who met Jorn in Léger’s atelier, literally taught himself weaving from scratch in 1940, demoralized by the war and psychologically unable to paint. He was struck by observing a woman weaving.
fabric scraps into a tapestry in Norway in 1938, on a trip through Scandinavia with Jorn after a joint exhibition of their paintings in Copenhagen. After years of separation due to the war, Jorn returned to visit Wemaère in France and was utterly surprised by his turn to tapestry. Wemaère convinced Jorn to try his hand as well, and they wove a number of works side by side, signing the works in singular-collective fashion as “J/W” for “Jorn / Wemaère.” Jorn encouraged Wemaère to experiment further with weaving and push it toward greater spontaneity. Jorn never fully took to the long, slow process, however, and he left for Tunisia in 1947 before the weavings were complete. Wemaère took on the role of skillfully finishing the projects, a pattern that would endure through their collaboration on *Le long voyage*.

Over the space of several years Jorn and Wemaère (and here Wemaère deserves the bulk of the credit) developed a unique method of tapestry production in which the work was created as it was woven, based on sketches rather than fully designed cartoons, the way a modernist painting was. In *The Bird in the Forest*, woven with the tapestry oriented sideways, the nearly abstract imagery and rhythmic color patterns relate directly to the weaving process, harmonizing yet not literally reproducing the geometric grid of the warp and weft. The tapestry was woven from a black and white sketch by Jorn; the linear network of the composition recalls Jorn’s drawings inspired by Paul Klee at the time. Jorn began the weaving of this particular work, but Wemaère finished it and determined its autumnal color scheme after Jorn had left for Tunisia.

The unprecedented level of collaboration and spontaneity Jorn and Wemaère’s process introduced into the hierarchical process of tapestry weaving presents a strong contrast to the more mainstream “renaissance” of French tapestry that began in the 1930s and culminated in the late 1950s and 1960s.
Jean Cassou, director of the refurbished Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, identified the “renaissance” of tapestry production in 1946, in the catalogue for the exhibition “La tapisserie française du Moyen-Age à nos jours” (French Tapestry from the Middle Ages to Today). Cassou’s text speaks poetically of the sacredness of tapestry and its links to stone architecture, once decorated only by stone sculpture. Whereas sculpture is all about the hand, Cassou writes, tapestry is like a painting that paints itself.\footnote{The artist Jean Lurçat, whose work was featured in the exhibition, is credited with almost singlehandedly reviving the tapestry industry at Aubusson in central France, one of three centers of French tapestry production since the sixteenth century. Most prominent is the Manufacture des Gobelins in Paris, the first tapestry workshop established under the royal patronage of Louis XIV, followed by the private Manufacture de Beauvais that also served aristocratic clients from the mid-seventeenth century onward. Aubusson was a third center of royal tapestry production for both public and private patrons. The reputation of Aubusson increased tremendously after the Second World War, however, when the Gobelins and Beauvais produced work for the Vichy régime but Aubusson remained associated with Free France. Lurçat received extensive support from communist audiences in the postwar period, and he often inscribed poetry associated with the French Resistance into his Aubusson tapestry designs.\footnote{Despite the popular success of tapestry in postwar Europe, however, the medium was marginalized in the art press even in the 1950s, as critics turned their attention almost entirely to the debates about French versus American postwar painting, and gestural abstraction (\textit{abstraction chaude}) versus geometric (\textit{abstraction froide}). American artists and theorists have especially neglected tapestry as a “merely” decorative medium in an era when modernism was framed in direct opposition to the decorative arts. Romy Golan, one of the only major scholars in the USA to address the significance of tapestry from the 1930s to the 1960s, writes that “tapestry has remained an embarrassment to the master narrative of modernism, not just because it repeatedly brushes up against the problem of the decorative but because it is, intrinsically, a hybrid [...] midway between painting and decoration.”}\footnote{American artists never developed a direct engagement with the medium, not only because tapestry, like public mural painting, was associated with the 1930s ideologies of Fascism and Communism, seen as anathema after the war, but also because the USA lacked France’s longstanding national pride in and patronage of tapestry. By the early twentieth century, tapestry production in France had become associated with second-rate interior decoration. It was not until the 1920s, in fact, when Aubusson tapestry began to engage with updating the traditions of weaving in light of modernist developments, thanks in part to Marius Martin, director of the Ecole Nationale d’Art Décoratif. Martin developed a new theory of the cartoon, recommending limiting the colors of the design and working with contemporary artists, which led to Jean Lurçat’s taking up the medium. He prepared his first tapestry cartoon on the invitation of}}
Marie Cuttoli, the wife of a French diplomat who opened her own design boutique in Paris after taking an interest in the connections between modern art, fashion, and decoration. Cuttoli appreciated Lurçat’s paintings, and invited him to design his first tapestry cartoon in Paris in 1933. Cuttoli also invited many of Jorn’s major artistic inspirations, including Léger, Le Corbusier, Arp, and Miró, to execute tapestry designs to be woven at Beauvais and Aubusson.

Jorn and Wemaëre likely saw some of these projects in Léger’s studio in 1936. That year Cuttoli exhibited, first in Paris and then Chicago and New York, a selection of modern tapestries she had commissioned, including an Aubusson tapestry based on Léger’s monumental 1932 painting *Composition aux trois figures* (*Composition with Three Figures*, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris). This tapestry was first shown to widespread acclaim in Le Corbusier’s apartment in 1935. The significance of modern tapestry as a public mural medium both traditional and popular, but also potentially modern, was likely a major topic of discussion in Léger’s studio while Jorn was there from 1936 to 1938. Though unrecognized at the time, Wemaëre was in the vanguard of this broader revival of tapestry spearheaded by Lurçat. Of all the modernist artists who turned to tapestry from the 1930s to the 1950s, Wemaëre was perhaps the only male painter who actually taught himself to weave. Wemaëre was interested in the idea of learning weaving from scratch, or as he put it, of “doing something with nothing.” He actively experimented with heterogeneous textures and materials, as part of his investigation of the unique material qualities of the medium.

The tapestry of Lurçat boldly captures the paradoxes inherent in the medium, marked by its aristocratic and royal traditions but also its unique material power and impact on generations of popular audiences—it is, as George Salles, Director of the Musées de France, summarized in 1947, an art “lordly and popular, ostentatious and rustic.” In fact, it was precisely the appeal of tapestry as a popular medium, rather than an aristocratic decoration, that Jean Cassou praised in his writing: “Via this functional and familiar medium, modern art infiltrates, without shocking people, everyday life. By the same token the modern artist reintegrates himself into the social. He puts his genius in the service of the collective. He recovers his role of laborer, worker, and producer.” The populist aspect of the medium was what attracted Wemaëre and Jorn. Yet Cassou proclaimed tapestry a renaissance of “the best traditional French qualities: good taste, clear reason, practical adaptation to reality, contempt for pomp, [and] a certain rigorous and Jacobin classicism.” Cassou’s ideas of good taste, national tradition, and classical virtue were anathema to Jorn. Jorn and Wemaëre’s work equally rejected the overtly nationalist and nostalgic subjects and monumental, heroic imagery of Lurçat’s tapestries, which although Communist in intent were read as an “art of luxury and privilege” at the time. By contrast, Jorn and Wemaëre’s *Le long voyage* conveys an intimate and welcoming viewing experience with its rhythmic color patterning and intimations of figures.
Jorn and Wemaère’s tapestries were included along with those of Lurçat in a major tapestry exhibition in Dijon in 1957 that exhibited tapestries from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. In Jorn’s catalog essay entitled “La lisse: Jouet d’artistes” (The Loom: An Artist’s Plaything), later published in *Pour la forme*, Jorn writes in reference to Lurçat, “The rationalization of the process of creating Aubusson tapestries is just a simplification, a clarification of a pre-existent state.” By contrast, he emphasizes the spontaneous inventiveness required of all the weavers in Jorn and Wemaère’s own workshop: “A team had to be formed […] of undistorted elements, new to the craft and endowed with a creative spirit, exempt from the handicraft ethic with all its habitual formal interruption and the systematic distinction between creation and execution.” Jorn’s references to *éléments non déformés* (undistorted elements) is a play on the notion of “formation,” meaning education. He also emphasizes their break with the stylistic approach of Léger, setting his and Wemaère’s processes of both painting and tapestry production in opposition to Cubist notions of style and structure. Wemaère says that they wanted to “create and execute [the design] at the same time.” Jorn and Wemaère made no reference whatsoever to medieval or heraldic traditions, instead drawing on non-Western and folk traditions of weaving from Peru, Tunisia, and rural Norway. Yet their monumental tapestry in Århus remains a traditional medium widely appealing to a non-art audience much less likely to appreciate the grotesque aesthetic of the ceramic mural. It is a unique statement of expressive abstraction in tapestry, made possible by its experimental process of making.

For a public high school designed to embody democratic egalitarian principles, the Århus project epitomized Jorn’s ideals of not only reaching a popular audience, but also developing creative models of collective production that resisted spectacular individualism. The unique collaboration of the two artists who became friends in Léger’s studio—the Dane Jorn, with his Communist and teacher’s college roots, and the Frenchman Wemaère, from a well-to-do Catholic family in Versailles—would push the medium as far as it could go toward a humbler form of collective expression, drawing on direct input from the type of people they wanted their art to speak to: people without any necessary expertise in either painting or weaving. The weavers were chosen, instead, for their passion and enthusiasm for the work.

Jorn and Wemaère were not interested in the simple translation of cartoons into a tapestry. Spontaneity was essential, and difficult to foster in a labor-intensive medium. One of their greatest achievements was the degree to which the artists succeeded in managing the expressive interpretations of the sketch by each artist / weaver in a painstakingly long process during which the results were not fully visible until the end. Italian music student-turned-weaver Paola Faemali began weaving the tapestry in a tiny atelier Wemaère rented in Paris, after a loose oil sketch and its enlargement as a full-scale black and white photograph which jointly served as their model. Soon the young Belgian painter Yvette Cauquil-Prince, who owned the atelier space, became interested in what they were doing, so they taught her weaving and
she worked on it as well. This was the beginning of a long career weaving artistic interpretations of modernist paintings for Cauquil-Prince.\footnote{In all, five weavers from different countries collaborated on the work, including a young artist named Gilbert Heck from Alsace, Inge Bjørn from Denmark (the only participant who already knew how to weave), and Micheline Vanderschrijven from Belgium. They used a heterogeneous combination of natural and synthetic yarns—acrylic, cotton, and silk, sheep and reindeer wool—gathered by Wemaëre (Color Plate 10).}

Wemaëre also dyed the yarns himself in his studio in Versailles, creating a harmonious range of jewel-like tones. Wemaëre arrived at the atelier every other day to supervise, an important role ensuring some continuity according to the weavers. Each had to interpret the sketches in his or her own way, working from the enlarged, reversed black and white photo-sketch and the smaller color paint sketch, and each passage had to be integrated into the whole.\footnote{The weavers could only work one at a time on the larger of the two looms in the small studio. They could not see more than 15 cm at a time, and had to work from memory of what came before. Their diverse personal and national backgrounds made the work highly unpredictable, and they wondered whether the various aesthetic approaches would come together.}

The weaving of *Le long voyage* harmonized in the end due to Wemaëre’s conscientious supervision, and the final work conveys a lyrical aesthetic also visible in his paintings.

Wemaëre and Jorn were most concerned with sustaining the energy of creation throughout the long process of weaving, to minimize the gap between creation and execution.\footnote{Jorn maintains that the one thing they agreed on when they began weaving was that “the image must create itself spontaneously in matter itself, executed by us without any patiently elaborated sketch.” He writes: “the orchestration of our work closely resembled that of jazz.” Though the term “our work” applies here only loosely—Jorn came only three times to visit the atelier, and was impatient with the pace of the work—he phrase pinpoints the introduction of spontaneity into a medium normally opposed to it. Jorn invited Bachelard to come view the work and write a text about it; the philosopher praised it as what he called “a major example of open creation.” He writes, in perhaps the most poetic account of their collaboration, “Asger Jorn and Pierre Wemaëre have extended their fraternité. Their métier of weaving has become an open site where, needle in hand, new workers have come to dream.”}

Bachelard immediately recognized the unique nature of the collaboration in Wemaëre’s atelier, even if his text is somewhat idealized in the sense that Jorn did not engage with the daily work of weaving the way he did with ceramics. Most of the weavers, moreover, were women working in a medium traditionally associated with women’s work under the men’s supervision. At the same time, Wemaëre himself took on some of the most tedious work such as the dyeing. Jorn and Wemaëre did not produce a truly radical democratic weaving process, but they reconceived that process as one involving the
direct creative input of the weavers to an unprecedented degree. Moreover, the complexity and vividness of the finished tapestry produces a lively impact that varies with each viewing experience, something exceptional in the medium of tapestry.

*Le long voyage* refuses both the overt nationalism, nostalgia, and humanism of Lurçat and the clean, modern harmonies of Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier played a significant role in the international revival of tapestry following the publication of his text “Muralnomad” in the first *Biennale internationale de la tapisserie* catalog in 1962. He writes:

> The destiny of contemporary tapestry is appearing; it is becoming the “mural” of modern times. We are “nomads” inhabiting apartments in rental buildings equipped with common services; we change apartments following the evolution of our families; […] we sometimes change condition, neighborhood, country […]. This wall of wool that is tapestry can be taken down from the wall, rolled up under our arms at will and taken to hang elsewhere. This is why I have called my tapestries “muralnomad.” The domestic tapestry responds to a legitimate poetic desire. By its texture, its matter, by the reality of its execution, it contributes its own warmth to an interior.\(^5\)

After his first commissions for Marie Cuttoli in 1935, Le Corbusier began designing tapestries again in 1948 at the invitation of master weaver Pierre Baudouin at Aubusson and produced hundreds of tapestries into the 1960s. Each of his tapestries were woven by master weavers after cartoons he designed. The liberty they express is that of the modernist master’s hand alone: Le Corbusier’s unique visions of post-Cubist harmony between organic and structural form. For Jorn and Wemaëre, the “warmth” of Le Corbusier’s tapestries was pale. They achieved a more dynamic abstract imagery using a more collaborative and spontaneous approach, and the abstract vitality of the textile’s design enabled the creativity of the collaborative weaving process to be shared with a broader audience.

The *Long voyage* tapestry, like the ceramic mural, is the expression of a dialogue between Jorn and a wide range of artists and artisans in Paris and Albisola. Jorn functioned as the initiator of encounters among many diverse perspectives, all of which are materially present in the finished works. Like the mural projects of Helhesten and Cobra but profoundly more tactile, these, too, exemplify Jorn’s particular approach to singular–collective expression. They reject the modernist notion of individual expression that was becoming spectacularly re-inscribed in the postwar rhetoric of modernizing the craft media just as it was in the professionalization of abstract painting during the Cold War. They revive turn-of-the-twentieth-century ideals of the decorative environment as a refuge from the depersonalizing aspects of modern society, reframing it as a social rather than a psychological critique. They re-conceptualize traditional artistic processes as simultaneously local and international, producing a decorative art appropriate for postwar industrial societies shaped by constant change. Their confrontational and unpredictable aesthetic of material excess, particularly in the ceramic mural, acknowledges the contradictory understandings of art in a complex global society.
This is a contemporary decorative art critical of both nationalist notions of craft tradition and avant-garde tendencies to render art outmoded by dissolving it into design. The two murals are monuments to the commitment of Jorn and his colleagues to breaking down the hierarchical processes of traditional media and opening them to spontaneous expression. They could thus respond directly and poetically to developments in postwar architecture and design that depersonalized the spaces of everyday life and seemed to threaten both human creativity and community.

Notes

2. Ibid., 48.
4. Jorn knew Glob since 1937, when they met at the Kunstnernes Efteraarsudstilling. Glob was a painter turned archaeologist who had shown work at the KE exhibition in 1934. Jorn then befriended Viggo Nielsen when Nielsen worked at the National Museum in Copenhagen, where Jorn often came to visit Glob or to study the collections.
7. Sørensen and Yde, Det store relief og den lange rejse, 7.
13. On these developments, see the excellent anthology edited by Joan Ockman, Architecture Culture 1943–1968.


20. Ibid., 42.


22. See the section on Miró in *Cahiers d’art* 20–21 (1945–1946), 269–300; and “Ceramiques de Picasso,” an extensive special issue of *Cahiers d’art* 23 (1948), 72–208.


26. A major recent Jorn retrospective, for example, featured only one ceramic piece among over 80 paintings, drawings, and prints. Sylvie Wuhrmann, ed. *Asger Jorn: Artiste libre* (Lausanne: Fondation de L’Hermitage / La Bibliothèque des Arts, 2012).


37. See the critical excerpts in Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Asger Jorn i Italien*, 33.


39. See Jorn, *Concerning Form*, 35.


43. On Informel and science, see, for example, Georges Mathieu, “Towards a New Convergence of Art, Thought, and Science,” *Art International* (May 1, 1960), 27–44; and Stephane Lupasco, “Le principe d’antagonisme et l’art abstrait,” *Ring des arts* 1 (1960), 6–21. Lupasco’s “tri-dialectic” theories were a major influence on Jorn’s theory of “trialectics” in the 1960s.


46. See Niggl, *Pinot Gallizio*, 16.


48. See, for example, Baj’s *An Evening at Home with a Television Show*, 1955, reproduced in ibid., 128.


52. Jorn, “Man kan få kvalme af at se på et billede,” in Nationaltidende, September 27, 1953, 8.


54. Sørensen and Yde, Det store relief og den lange rejse, 11.


59. For images and slogans of the Pavillon, see Corbusier and Jeanneret, Des canons, des munitions? Merci! Des logos ... s. v. p. ... Pavillon des temps nouveaux. Jorn responds to many of these slogans directly in “Ansigt til Ansigt,” in A5. Meningsblad for unge arkitekter 2, no. 5 (January–February 1944).


64. Gaston Bachelard, La terre et les rêveries du repos (Earth and Reveries of Repose), 1946, quoted in ibid.


71. Jorn, _Concerning Form_, 47.


73. Jorn, _Concerning Form_, 77.


78. According to Wemaëre, they tried to produce a totally spontaneous tapestry without using sketches at all, but it was impossible. Interview with Pierre Wemaëre, Versailles, June 25, 2008. This interview was the culmination of two prior interviews by the author conducted via email in May–June, 2005.


84. Sallès’s comment appears in the Preface of the 1947 Brussels edition of Cassou, _La tapisserie française du moyen age à nos jours._


89. Interview with Pierre Wemaëre, 2008.


92. Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 42.


Jubilant critiques

Leaving his wife and children in the house in Albisola, Jorn bought a loft in Paris in 1955. He had been spending more and more time there since late 1954, when he met Guy Debord and Michèle Bernstein for the first time. Jorn had first contacted them in November after Enrico Baj showed him copies of their Lettrist International journal Potlatch, which contained critiques of postwar reconstruction and architectural theory comparable to his own. He wrote to André-Frank Conord, editor of the journal, that while he had felt alone in his attack on the architects, he was very happy to find similar points of view in Potlatch. Jorn believed in a constructive critique involving elements of joy and passion, aspects he recognized in International Lettrism. Describing his artistic goals as “significant and subjective (significatif et subjectif),” he writes in the letter that he sees in Lettrism a similar attention to “the signification of the word, not to its purely sensory character, nor to its symbolic sense.” Debord responded to Jorn’s forwarded letter, writing, “We are happy to learn of your actions in a struggle that is also ours. The necessity of exploiting the immense power of architecture for passionate ends is one of the basic proclamations of our movement.”

Debord was initially involved in the Lettrist avant-garde, established in 1946 by Isidore Isou, a Romanian visionary poet who believed his new movement would take its cue from Dada’s destruction of language into nonsense syllables. Lettrist poetry and art would further break down the alphabet into its constituent letters, and ultimately the movement aimed to create a new society devoted to youthful creativity through the destruction of the old world. Debord co-founded a splinter group, the Lettrist International (LI), in 1952 with Gil Wolman and a few other dissident Lettrists, outsiders who ultimately developed an innovative integration of theory and critical practice, creating a new set of terms that united poetry, politics, and contemporary urbanism.

The founding event of the LI was a public denouncement of Charlie Chaplin—darling of the Surrealists as well as the European left—as a reactionary whose entertaining persona prevented people from protesting against their impoverished existence. The Lettrist International produced
experimental avant-garde literature consisting entirely of appropriated texts, provocative films consisting of soundtracks without images, and post-Surrealist collages. The LI developed all of the major ideas later associated with the Situationist International that Jorn, Debord, and Bernstein would co-found in 1957, such as “psychogeography,” defined in 1955 as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”

Other key Lettrist / Situationist ideas that would have a significant impact on contemporary art, activism, and urbanism are détournement (the subversion of already existing media); the dérive (urban meanderings that lay bare the power that structures public space); and “unitary urbanism” (the continual recreation of the urban environment, using advanced technology toward the liberation of desire). These ideas related to leaving behind the production of objects in favor of transforming art into a politicized aesthetic experience of the urban environment. Jorn, who always thrived on conflict, would take the LI’s ideas of the dematerialization of art with a grain of salt. He was able to work around the issue, at least for a time.

In 1956, he organized the first meeting of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB) and the Lettrist International. The “First World Congress of Free Artists” was sponsored jointly by two groups in Alba. It included Baj, Dangelo, Constant, Gallizio, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone, and Lettrist Gil Wolman. Jorn and Wolman delivered speeches to the assembled artists. In his talk, Jorn explains that the contemporary avant-garde is “given over to an apparently impossible and useless struggle.” He specifies that “the struggle of this group must be of essential importance for the forces in whose name it struggles—in our case, human society and artistic evolution—and the position achieved by this avant-garde must later be confirmed by a more general evolution.”

The significance of the Situationist International for contemporary art, architecture, film, and critical theory is undeniable in the early twenty-first century. Jorn’s role in the movement, however, has been overlooked; it was he who most strongly related the early practices of the SI, from 1957 to 1961, to visual art, and he financed Situationist activities with the sale of his paintings. Equally significant were the theoretical insights that Jorn provided, including his self-critical understanding of the avant-garde. His description of the avant-garde relates to his idea that the artist must introduce the new, which by definition is unexpected, potentially unwelcome, and seemingly useless and worthless. Jorn maintains that the value of avant-garde production can only be validated by society later, through a “general evolution,” as opposed to a revolution instigated by the vanguard. He is unique in his insistence that the avant-garde cannot and should not force change onto society, but society must itself change in sympathy with the avant-garde’s innovations in order for them to endure. At the end of his speech, Jorn insists that he is not trying to validate his group’s own avant-garde status, but rather to examine its position in society. He specifies that, “The artistic avant-garde, unlike that of war, can never be destroyed because
its force remains in its completed works.” In Jorn’s understanding, the avant-garde cannot be reduced to pure experience, but leaves traces of its activity behind, traces that can inspire further avant-gardes and potentially become part of new critical engagements.

In early 1957 at Galerie Taptoe in Brussels, a year after his acclaimed solo exhibition there, Jorn was in a group exhibition with Ralph Rumney, Piero Simondo, and Yves Klein. Debord and Bernstein had been invited to show their psychogeographic maps and paintings, but failed to show (after a misunderstanding that blew up over a missed meeting with Jorn at the Gare du Nord). Jorn, Rumney, Klein, Wallace Ting, and Maurice Wyckaert made a collaborative painting for the exhibition, undermining the notion of painting as an art of virtuosity and control in a cacophonous riot of color, gesture, and brash signatures that recall graffiti tags more than autographs. In May, Jorn invited Debord to Copenhagen in order to reconcile their differences, and there they made the groundbreaking book *Fin de Copenhague*. He and Debord would later disagree fundamentally about the value of art objects, supporting mutually exclusive positions on painting, which Debord rejected outright. Nevertheless, their related conceptions of the role and function of the avant-garde as an activist collective opposed to the bourgeois–individualist conception of art developed in the context of their early work together, above all the artist’s books they produced, unique works whose artistic origins and graphic legacy have yet to be fully comprehended. *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires* summarize the early concerns of the Situationist group in examining the increasingly narrow possibilities of avant-garde experimentation and critique in the rapidly changing conditions of postwar spectacular culture. These projects, as well as the monumental “history painting” *Stalingrad* and the détournement of Jorn’s “Modifications” on flea market canvases, are some of the most profound artistic engagements of the SI.

*Fin de Copenhague*

The artist’s books Jorn made in the 1950s and 60s embody his conception of the collecting of preexisting images as an “artistic method in its own right.” The book is a highly personal format that embodies Situationist ideals of interpersonal experience below the radar of the “spectacle,” the public image regime that defines social power. As a medium, the book is available to one observer at a time and thus less able to be recuperated as a public symbol of power, in the way that, for example, Jackson Pollock was heavily promoted in late 1950s Europe as a symbol of the rugged American artist as a professional in self-expression. Pollock exemplified America’s position at the forefront of cultural and economic innovation based on individual talent. By contrast, the artist’s book had been a more personal medium of avant-garde experimentation for generations, even if experimental books of the 1950s have been largely overlooked in favor of luxury editions by well-known artists.
Anticipating the explosion of artist’s books in the 1960s as a counter-cultural strategy of conceptual art, Jorn experimented with them in collaboration with poets, anthropologists, and activists like Guy Debord. The books *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires*, made with Debord and the printers Otto Permil and Bjørn Rosengreen in 1957–1958, reject the modernist emphasis on the original image, acknowledging instead that in a postwar culture newly inundated with prefabricated images, creativity exists as much in the selection and interpretation of images as their invention. They anticipate postmodern practices of appropriation and alternative distribution systems that would not fully emerge until after Jorn’s death.

*Fin de Copenhague* (literally, *End of Copenhagen*) lists Jorn as author and playfully designates Debord “conseiller technique pour le détournement” (technical advisor on *détournement*). It uses kitsch images as a site of deliberate misreading and creative reconfiguration, combining images clipped from ads with Jorn’s singular painterly forms, the colorful, abstract ink additions that create dynamic visual interactions on each page (Color Plate 11). Made with physical fragments of what the SI defined as a spectacular society, where the media predefines images and emotions as clichés, the book literally reduces the media’s received ideas to meaninglessness. Messages like “… et voilà votre vie transformée!” (and voilà, your life is transformed!) or “votre action est efficace” (your action is effective), become simultaneously ridiculous and open to reinterpretation. Many of the ads feature typical Danish products like Tuborg beer and touristic ads that, in combination with local weather reports, present the city of Copenhagen as a no-man’s land of pseudo-experience that could represent any city in a bland international landscape.

The commentary accompanying the book’s release also identifies it as a direct response to Le Corbusier’s *Ville radieuse*, the ideal city of the future endlessly propagandized in the architect’s illustrated texts since the 1930s. The “End of Copenhagen,” then, appears as a delirious response to the insistence on forward-looking rational planning and harmony in Le Corbusier’s theories. The ink drips sometimes suggest maps or are superimposed with map fragments and directional signs, abstract references to Situationist urbanism and the *dérive* that seem to liberate Copenhagen from its position on the “periphery” of Europe. The avant-garde collage aesthetic recalls Jorn’s 1930s collages of old engravings set into loose geometric frameworks for Jens August Schade’s *Kommodetryven* (see Fig. I.5). Like Surrealist collage, *Fin de Copenhague* conflates established categories, using kitsch in an “avant-garde” format, but now it also presents abstract painting as kitsch. Both *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires* have mainly been discussed in the context of Situationist theory, in relation to their appropriation of media images, but the two books actually have as much to do with abstract drawing and painting as reproduced media. *Fin de Copenhague*, which Jorn initiated, is often overlooked completely in favor of *Mémoires*, but it largely determined the latter’s visual aesthetic.

To make *Fin de Copenhague*, Jorn and Debord clipped images and logos from a stack of magazines from the corner newsstand in Copenhagen, arranging...
them freely on each page. Permild and Rosengreen later printed Jorn’s dripped-ink additions in vivid colors. The process was both unskilled and collaborative, to the point where it remains impossible to determine which artist chose what. The artists reportedly made it in a 24-hour period and a party-like atmosphere, meaning they treated it more as play than as work.

For the ink patterns, Jorn pastiched Jackson Pollock’s drip method by dripping ink from a nine-foot ladder down onto the prepared plate, and then manipulated the drawings by turning them this way and that. The drawings were momentary and thus “original,” but at the same time directly based on the practice of Pollock. They demonstrate that originality means simply a specific perspective in space and time, rather than the old modernist narrative of individual breakthroughs. The printers printed these designs in a gradient of deliberately bright, seemingly mass-produced colors. Jorn’s dripped and poured forms create a sort of grammar of abstract and chance gestures. The printing literally made these painterly fragments into clichés of themselves: the word “cliché” is the original French term for “stereotype,” referring to the metal plate from which an image is printed. The combination of abstract designs and appropriated images of business logos like “Esso” and ad slogans like “Es ist ein ganz anderes Fahren” (It is a whole different ride) results in an unprecedented work that sets mass culture in direct relationship to the high cultural forms of abstract painting. The maximal disorientation of the brightly-colored forms combined with the nonsensical juxtaposition of texts and images produces a liberating effect, allowing viewers to redefine the meanings of each fragment for themselves.

Jorn’s process was an explicit response both to European Informel painting as well as the widespread excitement throughout Europe over the new possibilities and meanings suggested by Pollock’s process. Some of Pollock’s drip paintings had been exhibited in 1948 and 1950 in Venice, where they made a strong impact on Jorn’s Arte Nucleare colleagues. Drips were used in Baj’s painting in the early 1950s, when they also appeared in Jorn’s—although the process, it should be remembered, was not invented by Pollock but inspired by experiments of the 1930s in the context of both Surrealism and Mexican Muralism. Jorn first experimented with dripping paint off the balcony onto a paper laid on the floor in the studio of Alberto Giacometti in Paris in 1938. Troels Andersen describes, following Ejler Bille, who was present at the time, that Jorn was attempting to demonstrate the limits of Surrealist automatism, meaning that at this early date he was already exploring a sort of pastiche of abstract painting methods. Perhaps the earliest postwar example of Jorn using a drip method is on a 1953 etching of a monster where Jorn used some kind of dropper to drip acid onto the plate and distort the outline of the figure. He most likely did not see Pollock’s large-scale drip painting in person for the first time until 1955 at the Museum of Modern Art-sponsored exhibition 50 Ans d’art aux États-Unis in Paris, although Pollock’s method was widely publicized in France in 1951 when one of Hans Namuth’s photographs of Pollock at work in his studio was printed full-page in Art d’aujourd’hui.
Jorn was aware of Pollock’s methods in any case by the early 1950s, when Erik Nyholm gave him a copy of the catalog of the 1951 exhibition of black pourings at Betty Parsons Gallery. These were at least as important to Jorn as Pollock’s large-scale paintings; he even reproduced one in his 1958 book *Pour la forme.* Jorn produced similar drawings for *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires.* A pale green drip figure accompanying the phrase from Pascal, “Eloquence prolongs boredom,” toward the end of *Mémoires* directly evokes the Pollock reproduction in *Pour la forme* (Fig. 4.1).

The form makes Pollock’s grand patterns diminutive and accessible in the banal format of the book. The books present painterly signs for the ordinary and mundane—the drip returned to its original aleatory and/or scatological associations. They make a particularly Jornian claim to memorialize a singular, but not spectacular, presence that has been rendered invisible by modernism’s monumental self-expression. Unlike his larger paintings, Pollock’s black pourings suggested ideas central to Jorn’s own preoccupations at the time: ink blots and grotesque figures, the play of gravity and chance, the relationship to new quantum-physical theories of space–time, the idea of a fundamental grammar of abstraction, in short the diverse possibilities of a more intimate, but contemporary and exciting, visual signification.

*Fin de Copenhague* pastiches the drip method by fragmenting it and presenting it as a cliché. The large-scale color folios of the gradated drips were cut into smaller pages for the book, disorienting the actual trajectory of the pours and making an understanding of the entire image as a painting impossible. In contrast to Pollock’s graceful loops and splashes, Jorn’s spatters run in all directions, a disorder heightened by their juxtaposition with printed found imagery. More pointedly, Jorn’s use of his fists to produce an aggressive bodily impression in blue ink (see Color Plate 11) seems ironically to reference the hand prints used prominently by Pollock in *Number 1A, 1948,* a painting Jorn likely saw at the 1955 Musée National d’Art Moderne exhibition. It is equally notable in light of the book’s unique aesthetic that Joan Miró produced two lithographs in the large-format Galerie Maeght publication *Derrière le miroir* in 1946 featuring prints of hands and feet juxtaposed with large vividly-colored shapes and black ink marks (Fig. 4.2). These prints would have surely made a strong impact on Jorn, who frequented the gallery and was familiar with *Derrière le miroir* through the earlier writings of Cobra critic Michel Ragon.

The printed drips in *Fin de Copenhague* depict the reminiscence of a gesture twice removed, in a combination homage and critique of Pollock. Jorn’s drip pastiche literally cuts off personal gestures from their original relationship to bodily movement by means of the cut of the folio into pages. The gesture is never authentic, they suggest, but always mediated, made less personal the moment it is recorded. This commentary also extends to the image of Pollock himself as an art celebrity. Although Jorn admired Pollock’s painting, he criticized the treatment of Pollock in the mass media. The American artist was by the late 1950s the most famous contemporary painter and...
a highly politicized figure in Europe. After an initial period in the early 1950s, when critics attempted to portray the New York School artists as under-cultured Europeans, Pollock came to stand for the ruggedness of American culture as well as American political power in the wake of the Marshall Plan. For Jorn, his growing fame stood for the institutionalization and Americanization of the gestural techniques already explored in Helhesten and Cobra. Pollock became an example of the very overvaluation of personal expression that his own process of drip painting tended to negate. *Fin de Copenhague* subjects Pollock’s method to *détournement*, subverting it toward a critique of individual expression. At the same time, in their new iteration the drips are also original creations. They point to the way the originality of a painterly gesture is always contextual, and its meaning socially determined.

**Détournement and kitsch**

The use of fragmented advertisements from mainstream publications like *Life* magazine exemplifies *détournement* in a much more straightforward way than the drips. *Fin de Copenhague* subverts the function of ads to instill desire in their audience, allowing them to operate in unexpected ways. The Situationists considered advertising part of the ideological apparatus of the “spectacle.” In this view, the social powers that control visual technologies, media such as television and photojournalism that saw an unprecedented expansion in the postwar period, create a public appearance of participation and democracy while actually turning the mass public into nothing but passive spectators, consumers rather than producers. Jorn himself critiques this function of ads already in the 1940s, describing advertising as an objective, scientific exploitation of other people’s private desires. He opposes advertising to agitation, asserting that agitation—meaning a subjective transmission of one’s own desires to others—is the goal of art. *Fin de Copenhague* literally detaches ads from their ideological function, making them available for new significations.

*Fin de Copenhague* has long appeared an anomaly in Jorn’s practice because he has been known primarily as a painter; the aesthetic sources of the book, therefore, deserve a more detailed exposition. The aesthetic of juxtaposing fragments of printed text with figural images, especially of the female nude, was common in Dada and Surrealist collage. In 1956, a major retrospective
of the Dada movement at Galerie de l’Institut included a wide range of Dada manifestoes and artworks, such as early collages by Ernst, Johannes Baargeld, and Francis Picabia. Likely Jorn and Debord discussed it at the moment they were making *Fin de Copenhague*. The 1930s collages of Georges Hugnet, who wrote the catalog for the 1956 exhibition, directly anticipate the juxtaposition of female figures and ads with printed text on a white page (Fig. 4.3). Mémoires quotes the souvenirs of another Dadaist, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, which Debord would later misremember as those of Hugnet, perhaps because of the impact of the 1956 exhibition. The Dada manifestoes feature notable typographic experimentations and endless proclamations parodying the language of advertisements. The return to Dada principles and collage methods at this moment was driven by Debord, who, as many scholars note, took an interest in both avant-garde literature and popular techniques of découpage since childhood. But Jorn had also investigated popular scrapbooks and avant-garde collage since the 1930s. He writes in “Intimate Banalities” that “the children who love pretty pictures and paste them in Books printed with ‘ALBUM’ give artists greater hope than any art critic or museum director.”

Debord reexamined the legacy of Dada and Surrealism in depth in his “Rapport sur la construction des situations” of 1957, but in this text he began to turn away from the production of objects completely. In this account, Debord lays the foundation of his version of Situationist theory. He insists that the very social forces that have the sole power to support avant-garde tendencies in culture also limit them. The bourgeoisie, according to Debord, awards success to artists to the precise degree that they renounce their group concerns and their politics. For this reason the common usage of the “avant-garde” label has become suspect—in other words, the avant-garde has become an institution. Debord does not however reject the term; rather, he proposes a proper reframing of its goals. Although he recognizes that the notion of a collective avant-garde, with its military implications, is a product of recent historical conditions, Debord, unlike Jorn, continues to propose a “revolutionary” cultural avant-garde. Much of the difference between Jorn and Debord’s otherwise close conceptions of the importance of the avant-garde at this time rides on their dispute over this term. Jorn understood
“revolution” to mean a large-scale social process beyond the scope of the avant-garde, however precise and well-coordinated its activities. In his debates with Dotremont over the founding of Surréalisme Révolutionnaire in 1947, Jorn had already objected to the use of “revolutionary” in reference to an art movement, asserting that it should refer to cultural and political transformations but not successive artistic projects. He espoused the term “evolution” over “revolution” precisely because it positioned the artist as a catalyst and a provocateur, but not the enforcer of an ideology thrust onto people from the outside.

Debord lays out in his “Report” the programs of unitary urbanism and détournement as revolutionary due to their precise refinement of avant-garde tactics. The primary actions of the avant-garde for Debord are the construction of everyday situations on the sole basis of liberated “passion” as well as the elaboration of an appropriate political critique. He upbraids Jorn’s IMIB, in fact, specifically for its “failure” to develop an appropriate theory. Debord would also not admit that the material traces of artistic production of situations had any value. The “Report” still calls for the SI to “empirically use everyday approaches and cultural forms that presently exist, while questioning their value,” however it suggests that these détournements are secondary to the theoretical development that would be the most prominent legacy of the SI.

Debord had experimented with collage in his Lettrist International days, however, in a 1954 series of collages exhibited in a Left Bank gallery called “métagraphies,” appropriating the title from Isou’s Lettrist movement. Only a few métagraphies by Debord, Wolman, and others still exist, direct predecessors for the use of appropriated text and gendered imagery in Fin de Copenhague. Debord’s métagraphie entitled Mort de J.H. ou Fragiles tissus (en souvenir de Kaki) (Fig. 4.4) is constructed around the image of the ex-model and drug addict Kaki (Jacqueline Harispe), a friend of International Lettrist Patrick Straram who frequented St. Germain-des-Près. Kaki had just died at age 19 by falling from her balcony.

Kaki appears over a background of classified ads for bars; Debord writes of this work in “Mode d’emploi du détournement”: “125 classified ads of bars for sale express a suicide more strikingly than the newspaper articles that recount it.” In an apparent homage to early Cubist collage but with a more disturbing content, extracts of newspaper accounts of her death are juxtaposed over her image next to an extract from some Spanish shipping regulations and snippets of headlines ranging from “ALCOHOL: GOOD TASTE” to “… doing away with long preparations,” a punning reference to suicide plans. Comic illustrations of a pilot in a cockpit suggest a kamikaze mission, adding a note of black humor to an otherwise self-serious work more overtly concerned with, as a sardonic text reads toward the lower edge, “our golden youth.” The collage satirizes the popular fascination with a beautiful tragedy even as it perpetuates it, implying that the truth of this woman’s life is completely inaccessible underneath its public representations.
Precedents for books composed of appropriated text and ads exist in other Lettrist International experiments as well. Gil Wolman’s notes for the second installment of his book *J’écris propre* show snippets of dialogue and text from various printed sources, joined by drawn lines reminiscent of the pages in *Mémoires*. While the Wolman texts were printed in the end as a smoothly collaged document, Debord and Jorn elaborated on the visual suggestions of his initial notes, where texts are connected and encircled with thinly drawn lines. In 1955, on the back cover of one of the journals that published the Lettrists, *Les lèvres nus*, appeared a collage by Belgian Surrealist Marcel Mariën (founder of the journal) that featured some of the same ad logos as *Fin de Copenhague*, including “Ford” and “Esso” (Fig. 4.5). Mariën’s collage *detourns* the ads by adding messages in each box, such as “Do not be a victim of FORD,” combined with a skull and an image of a car. These messages are much more literal than those in *Fin de Copenhague*, however, and the boxes much more orderly, carefully composed rather than exploded apart.

Jorn, for his part, was a keen observer of the art world in Paris, where the relationship between gestural abstraction and poetic texts was an active subject of exploration in the mid-1950s. Camille Bryen, poet and draughtsman who would become a lyrical–abstract painter after 1948, made Surrealist collages similar to Hugnet’s in the 1930s, juxtaposing fragmented female bodies with...
iconic images like the French flag and advertising slogans and newspaper headlines rendering the messages poetic and ironic. Perhaps Jorn encountered these works in the 1950s; Bryen was a friend of Wols, Arp, Tapié, and other important figures of the French postwar scene whose work Jorn would have observed in the Left Bank galleries he frequented during the Cobra period.

Perhaps more importantly, Bryen made poème-objets with Raymond Hains, Jacques de la Villeglé, Frédéric Benrath, and others in the 1950s. Pierre Restany discusses some of these works in a 1957 article, the language of which resonates strongly with the contemporaneous writings of Jorn and the SI (although the SI would later utterly dismiss Restany’s New Realist movement as mystical and reactionary). Restany’s short text on “The Poem-Object” contains proto-Situationist arguments about the “whole gigantic enterprise of the distribution of the image [that] has invaded our daily life.” It also makes specific claims about the significance of modern typography from Mallarmé to Apollinaire, and its influence on contemporary experiments in book illustration.

Restany highlights the idea of the “poem-object” as a “place where the painter and the poet meet,” focusing on the collaborations of Bryen and other Informel painters with various authors. One of the poem-objects Restany produced with painter Peter Brüning features typed texts distributed across the page in a manner reminiscent of Mallarmé that also anticipates Mémoires, though the texts are much more legible, in direct dialogue with Brüning’s Informel ink splatters. His evocative description of an “elliptic curve of the typographical ‘situations’” could equally describe the SI books, even if his mystical readings of a “pregnant sign, rebellious to analysis” and an “Instant of Shared Emotion” would be anathema to Situationist interpretation. Restany was still interested in lyric poetry, whereas the SI books broke with the Informel tendency in their active exploration of both appropriated journalistic jargon and advertising imagery.

Jorn may have been more directly inspired to explore the relationship between abstraction and mass culture by a project he could have seen on a trip to England in 1956, when his friend Lawrence Alloway invited him to visit London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts. The mockups for a now famous collage book by the Independent Group artist John McHale were exhibited that year at the ICA. Entitled Why I Took to the Washers in Luxury Flats, McHale’s project cut up magazine headlines, images of housewives, politicians, and beauty ads, rearranging them in a collage that emphasizes their frivolity and humor (Fig. 4.6).
4.6 John McHale, *Why I Took to the Washers in Luxury Flats*, ca. 1954. Page from collage book. 46 × 23.5 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Gift of Magda Cordell McHale
Though they lack Jorn’s painterly drips, McHale’s collages include visual puns such as a woman in lingerie cut in two halves and turned provocatively on her back, next to the text, “Many never suspect cause of backaches.” *Fin de Copenhague* includes sections that seem directly inspired by McHale, such as a page that presents its own more explicit sexual pun: a similarly clipped-in-half woman appears, this time a nude pinup (see Color Plate 11). She languishes underneath a giant phallic bottle pouring beer down over her. The drip form that appears between these two images seems to reference the sexual product of this encounter, while at the same time manifesting its own literal materiality as a formless splotch of ink. At the bottom of the scene appears a cigarette, as if to cap off the sexual experience. The vulgarity of the joke both reduces the ads to their most obvious and transparent operations and deliberately transgresses the bounds of social propriety.

The Independent Group was renowned for considering pop culture as a new field of creativity, taking in many ways the opposite strategy of the Situationists as pioneers of Pop Art. Alloway, a key member of the IG who was also a good friend of Jorn, wrote in 1958 that a work of art may not only look like an ad, it may *be* an ad. He wrote of the mass media as an urban and democratic art that should be examined with the codes of aesthetics formerly applied to high art. For Alloway, the mass arts related to everyday life and modernity, rather than the traditional timelessness of fine art.\(^47\) McHale, too, wrote about the leveling of all the arts on the social hierarchy, asserting that the future would be determined by arts that were expendable and constantly changing. His article “The Plastic Parthenon” argues for the reconsideration of culture in relation to expendability, mass circulation, and the swift transference of cultural forms across “multicommunication channels.”\(^48\) McHale described his new aesthetic as “both / and rather than either / or,” a concept Jorn embraced in his own way by rejecting any limitations, taboos, or incentives to purity in art-making. In another page from *Fin de Copenhague*, above a printed image of a North African man and a drawing of French soldiers appears the text “long live free Algeria,” scribbled in the manner of street graffiti. The phrase indicates the Situationists’ overt political position in support of the Algerian freedom fighters. The SI’s critique of a violent colonial régime was more political than anything produced by the Independent Group, with its celebratory embrace of kitsch and focus on the mass-mediation of politics. A printed fragment reading “There’s no whiteness” appears above the North African man. It relates to the pro-Algerian political position of the Situationists, but also takes on broader meanings, as a rejection of purity in any form—and as such, a rejection of modernist abstraction.

*Fin de Copenhague* underscores the potential value of kitsch not only for pleasure, as in the Independent Group projects, but also for critical *détournement*. Its avant-garde tactics of disorientation and juxtaposition cut across the isolation of the arts into autonomous spheres. Unlike the more celebratory Independent Group projects, *Fin de Copenhague* explicitly critiques the dominance of advertising in the abstract forms that render it nonsensical.
Unlike the Informel books, it turns abstract painting, too, into a kitsch language in direct dialogue with ads. At the same time, these forms convey an aesthetic experience unavailable to transmission through mechanical reproduction. They make possible the liberation and transformation of kitsch into new meanings by the reader.

Jorn framed the Situationist books as new forms of popular art, only a few years before the apotheosis of Pop as a high-art style. He wrote to Permild and Rosengreen that *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires* stood at the center of a literary-artistic renewal, a new understanding of the book. Jorn described their creative precedent as not a step forward, but a return to more populist forms. He argued that the new freedom the offset printing process allowed brought the books closer to medieval manuscripts as well as to Disney cartoons. Jorn considered cartoons a popular artistic medium, and the illustrated manuscript a more creative form of the book, in a historic context he believed was more socially harmonious. Inspired by John Ruskin, Broby-Johansen, and others, Jorn idealized the Gothic period as an age of spiritual harmony and economic collectivism. His reading of *Fin de Copenhague* in reference to historic and popular art forms disrupts its easy assimilation into an avant-garde lineage. The book transforms kitsch into agitation, and high art forms into kitsch. The direct dialogue of cultural fragments makes mediation part of its aesthetic message, asserting that there is no separation between high and low in the domain of reproduction. It implies that any type of culture can be turned into propaganda, necessitating that the subject take an active role in détourning it.

*Mémoires*

In July 1957, members of the LI and the IMIB—Debord, Jorn, Constant, Bernstein, Gil Wolman, Simondo, Pinot-Gallizio, and Elena Verrone—formed the Situationist International (SI) at Simondo’s hometown of Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy. The group would last until 1972, but only in the early years, largely due to Jorn’s social network, did it encompass the active participation of visual artists. The journal *Internationale situationniste* was much more theoretically and politically dense than the earlier publications on which Jorn collaborated. Its images mostly consist of appropriated images from advertising and soft pornography (the latter uncritically reproduced). The Situationists rejected copyright and published their texts anonymously, some of them aimed directly against the art world. In Belgium, they tossed a leaflet into an assembly of international art critics reading, “Vanish, art critics, partial, incoherent and divided imbeciles! In vain do you stage the spectacle of a false encounter …” They called such subversive actions “constructed situations,” extending the Lettrist practices of unitary urbanism into a wider social context including the sphere of culture.

In 1958, as Debord was helping Jorn edit his theoretical treatise *Pour la forme*, he also initiated their next artistic collaboration, the artist’s book *Mémoires,*
published that fall (although Permild and Rosengreen’s printer’s mark labels it 1959). The book is a meandering collection of images and tongue-in-cheek allusions to Debord’s LI experiences, famously wrapped in a sandpaper cover to threaten all adjacent books on the shelf. Jorn initially suggested “asphalt paper with the sticky side out.” They eventually decided on the less expensive sandpaper, although Permild later protested that it destroyed the knife in his cutting machine and was shredding the hands of the assistants cutting it by hand.\(^{53}\) Debord collected all the texts for the book himself, later carefully arranging them in a particular order on each page. He asked Jorn to contribute “supporting structures,” dripped or drawn abstractions to loosely connect or complement the texts and scattered images. The texts and images, including map fragments, architectural plans, engravings of famous paintings, and photographs, are presented in seemingly arbitrary arrangement, as if dropped onto the pages of a blank book, and their visual operations belie the simple presentation of messages. Debord’s own snapshots (taken by Ed van der Elsken) of the young Lettrists at their favorite Parisian haunts, such as the bar Moineau, appear throughout *Mémoires* (Fig. 4.7).

The snapshots refer to an experience of revelry and camaraderie on the most obscure fringes of French society.\(^{54}\) Although they appear to be straightforward documentary images, their decontextualization emphasizes their signification of a past already vanished. Their presence as scattered relics points to the present inaccessibility of the moments depicted. Juxtaposed with advertisements, banal stories of romance, or images of nineteenth-century armies, the photos float aimlessly in the space of memory defined by the book. The superficiality, banality, and assorted nonsense of the spectacle are shown to invade even our most personal thoughts.

The SI refers to *Mémoires* as a primary example of *détournement*, the “re-employment in a new unity of preexisting artistic elements.”\(^{55}\) Its use of entirely appropriated texts pastiches the passive subjectivity of the consumer. In place of a personal memoir, it presents an exploded collection of impersonal fragments. The various typefaces imply that all communication is regulated and distributed by the spectacle, in mass-produced parts. These texts include literary quotations and statements of leisure or adventure such as “yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum” (from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*) or “Bernard, Bernard, this green youth will not last forever” (from Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Bernard que pretend-tu dans le monde*); as well as theoretical statements from sociological questionnaires, Situationist, Marxist, or historical texts, for example: “what one calls urbanism today, that is, the art of arranging and embellishing entertainments,” or, “what demonstration do we want to make, and who do we think it would disturb?” The juxtaposition of jarringly disparate textual and visual fragments radically alienated from their original contexts suggests the utter inauthenticity of all publicly mediated communication. *Mémoires* figures memory as a fugitive process rather than a false image. Debord writes that spectacular society creates an endless cycle of nostalgia precisely because it erases the possibility of authentic memory. According to Debord,
4.7 Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, Page from *Mémoires* with color lithography by Jorn, 1959. 27.5 × 21.5 cm. Copenhagen: Permild and Rosengreen, n.p. Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. Photo: Lars Bay
the “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.”

Debord’s own obsession with representing the past responds directly to this perception. The text appropriations in Mémoires correspond to Debord’s favorite subjects as discussed in his own writings (detailed in Panegyric): romantic conquest, adventure stories, drinking, military strategy, and historical French culture. Yet neither the texts nor their arrangement corresponds in any linear way to Debord’s experience, in part because the experience referenced throughout the book was that of the Lettrists as a group. The book levels the photographic and printed records of the group’s existence with clichéd statements about personal memory that stand for their thoughts. Textual references to memory are set into play with the gestural mark, the legible with the abstract. Nostalgia itself becomes just another floating signifier devoid of a particular object. The Lettrists’ memories ultimately remain inaccessible to the reader. The fugitive quality of memory signifies a resistant subjectivity, even as the aesthetic of fragmentation, discontinuity, and disjunction opens up the memoir to our own projected memories.

The collaborative creation of Mémoires as an amateur project, building on the experiment of Fin de Copenhague, reinforces the centrality of collective experience signified throughout the book. Collectivity appears in the book’s sociological analyses of youth culture, the comic-book representations of teamwork, and the engravings of military groups from an old geography textbook. The snapshots identify collective experience as the means by which the constructed situation contests the spectacle. On a more fundamental level these references point to collectivity as a fundamental medium of memory construction. The book frames the experience of the Lettrists as unrepresentable precisely because it exists in the memories of not one, but a group of people. It embodies the idea of “collective memory” defined by Maurice Halbwachs, that memory is not an individual phenomenon but forms itself discursively in collective contexts defined by membership in specific social groups.

As ephemeral and marginal as it was, the Lettrist experience was primary for Debord as his first independent foray into collective subversion. The LI was a collection of individuals who turned hedonism into critique, refusing either to pursue official recognition or subsist on passive entertainment. In the 20-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, a voiceover describes the LI as an “ephemeral microsociety” that “put into practice a systematic questioning of all the works and diversions of a society, a total critique of its notion of happiness.” The Lettrists reconceived Marxist alienation as a separation of the subject from his or her own desires through the authority of the impersonal discourses of psychology, sociology, urbanism, advertising, and pornography. This expanded understanding
of alienation built on the theories of Isidore Isou, who identified “youth” as a potentially revolutionary force. Isou expanded the concept of youth to include all those without the status or means to participate fully in commodity production and consumption. Isou refers to the young as “externists”; situated outside the capitalist market, they are outsiders not because of age but because of economic lack. For Isou, the transience of youth as a stage of life represented a refusal of containment, categorization, and reification. The Lettrist International formalized in 1952 its split in the name of youth from the authoritarian dominance of Isou, whose rhetoric had become increasingly cultish in his descriptions of replacing God as the central creative element in the universe. By contrast, the Lettrists stated in 1953, “Oblivion (l’oubli) is our dominant passion.” The original term “oubli” signifies at once forgetting, intoxication, and anonymity.

There is a strong irony in the very idea of preparing one’s memoirs at the age of 26. The project developed out of Debord’s own fixation on the problem of memory and its mediatized representation, as well as the memoir’s relationship to power and subversion. Boris Donné has brilliantly excavated the vast network of literary, historical, and popular sources for the book, from Pascal to Lautréamont, based on the references provided by Debord. He decodes the seemingly indecipherable traces of an experience that the aesthetics of the book suggest is unrepresentable, making Debord’s cryptic remnants appear entirely comprehensible. Yet as Debord scholars have noted, Debord’s film In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, realized in 1978, and the later text Panegyric (the two volumes published in 1989 and 1997) approach much more closely the genre of written or visual memoir than either Mémoires or the impressionistic “anti-documentary” Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps. The second volume of Panegyric, in fact, consists of a visual chronology of Debord’s life made up of captioned photographs and reproductions including two pages of Mémoires. In it, the author’s note states baldly that “An image that has not been deliberately separated from its meaning adds great precision and certainty to knowledge. […] I intend […] to provide a reminder of it now.” Clearly, as with many memoirists, Debord’s attachment to an authentic narrative of his own life grew stronger with age—the very phenomenon his 1958 Mémoires travestied. The book was not a conventional memoir but, as Frances Stracey aptly describes, “a counter-hegemonic history dedicated to the overturning of conventional processes of historical memorialization.”

Mémoires records the contemporary collapse of the difference between memory and history, starting with the genre of the memoir itself, which spectacularizes the memories of select individuals. The public memoir originated in the early modern period as memoirs of men of state, a particularly celebrated genre in France. For centuries memoirs were privileged over other types of history writing, presenting what were regarded as the primary narratives of history. De Gaulle’s War Memoirs, published to great acclaim in 1954–1956 and quoted in Mémoires, did much to restore his prestige and
promote his vision of national unity and colonialist state power. On a page featuring the large façade of a French manor house under the label “THIS OLD SCOUNDREL EUROPE” appear some famous lines from the War Memoirs that become an ironic commentary on the Lettrist experience: “I was nothing, in the beginning. Not a shadow of a force or any kind of organization was there to support me ...” Facing these is a giant, and particularly phallic, pink blob alongside the détournement of an ad for detergent, reading “la saleté s’en va!” (the dirt goes away!) (Fig. 4.8).

Such a passage radically reconfigures mnemonic traces into a set of relics rendered meaningless by the perpetual renewal of the commodity. The appropriated texts reference pirate songs and histoires d’amour alongside
impersonal social–scientific treatises and diagrams. The heterogeneous texts and images détourn the memoir by relating the self-promotional genre of political memoirs to avant-garde and popular narrative traditions. Often these are histories of self-destruction rather than edification, like Thomas de Quincy’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, stories that utterly negate the standards of moral rectitude and redemption that characterize the usual memoir, not to mention its pretext to truth.

**Memory as fiction**

*Mémoires* reduces all textual and visual representations of memory to a meaningless cliché, starting with the first page, which opens with the phrase from a French translation of *Hamlet*, “Me souvenir de toi? Oui, je veux” (Remember you? Yes, I want). Nearly every page directly addresses memory as presented in the mass media’s preoccupation with personal stories, the fictional conceit of memory in the novel, the scientific investigation of human and artificial memory, and the printed word of history. The subversion of these texts questions the very possibility of representing memory in any form of official discourse. Yet each détourned message depends on the “memory” of some lost original in order to function: the “second law of détournement” laid out in 1956 by Debord and Gil Wolman states that, “The distortions introduced in the detourned elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements.”

MacKenzie Wark argues, in fact, that the primary subject of all détournement is memory itself, specifically memory as the purported property of an individual:

The key to détournement is its challenge to private property. Détournement attacks a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labor in the cultural realm can become a mere individual’s property. But what is distinctive about this fetishism is that it does not rest directly on the status of the thing as a commodity. It is, rather, a fetishism of memory. It is not so much commodity fetishism as co-memory fetishism. In place of collective remembrance, the fetish of the proper name.

*Détournement* subverts the functioning of memory itself by short-circuiting the memories attached to each fragment, detaching it from its experiential context, or what Maurice Halbwachs called its “lived history.” The reader of *Mémoires* is therefore forced to rethink each text in relation to the present moment, or indeed to a future that now appears full of possibilities.

The process of reading *Mémoires* becomes a sort of dérive, challenging the spectacle’s reification of spatiality and presentness over the temporal by creating an experience that unfolds in time. The dérive contested what Debord conceived as the spectacular function of turning experience into passive representation. He writes: “The spectacle, being the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment...
of any history founded in historical time, is in effect a *false consciousness of time.*" Where the spectacle, in Situationist theory, tends to spatialize time into a static image, the dérive responds by temporarizing space. It activated and personalized the newly reconstructed urban spaces of postwar Europe, attempting to defy the modern scopic regime of the spectacle by operating, as Tom McDonough observes, “below the threshold of visibility.” McDonough describes how the fragmented and detourned map becomes a Situationist sign of the appropriation of everyday experience in time, making space into a social practice rather than a neutral context. The dérive exemplifies how the collective experience of both time and space became the primary Situationist method of reclaiming subjectivity from its spectacular representations so removed from the temporal flux of real life. The fragmentation of architectural plans and maps in Mémoires and the suggestion of unpredictable spatial trajectories in Jorn’s ink forms directly reference the dérive as a spontaneous activity below the radar of the spectacle. Such experiences made oppositional thought and action possible because they operated interpersonally and invisibly (recorded accounts of actual Situationist dérives are scant and enigmatic). The map fragments subvert the vision of totality normally presented by the map. The tendency of the printed ink lines to mimic streets and boundaries creates a new subjective collage of city spaces. The experience of the book becomes a wandering through uncharted territory that shifts with each reading.

By contrast, interpretations of Mémoires by most scholars, notably Greil Marcus, Roberto Ohrt, and Vincent Kaufmann, focus narrowly on its nominal function as a record of Debord’s personal experience with the Lettrist International in a manner that tends to foreclose other readings. The text of Mémoires is divided into three sections relating to the early days of the LI. “June 1952” opens the book with excerpts of a sordid love affair from a crime novel and ends with a reference to the screening of Debord’s first film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade,* via a two-page spread with extracts from the script and a cartoon with a man in front of a blank screen, captioned, “Cine-Club: You are now witnessing the projection of the first failed film.” Next, under “December 1952,” appear references to “communication and discussion,” images of the group at the bar, maps, prison plans, and military imagery perhaps signifying their clandestine “avant-garde” activity. In section three, “September 1953,” the visual cacophony seems to increase in more vivid and glaring colors while the same references abound to literature, *Treasure Island,* pinups, maps, history paintings, sociological texts, Lettrist tracts, and architecture. Debord scholars, rather than analyzing the book’s complex visual syntax, have interpreted it as a poetic but fully decipherable description of Debord’s experience: his first film, the heyday of group activity, and the third phase when the group according to Marcus begins to come apart. In fact, the final date of 1953 did not refer to the dissolution of the LI, whose activities continued into 1957.

Visually, the biographical reading is not sustainable, because the book does not conform to the straightforward Lettrist chronology. Rather, it sets up a chronology only to disrupt it. Marcus, for example, reads the text
“the dirt goes away!” in the third section as a direct reference to the purging of unsympathetic participants from the Lettrist group (Fig. 4.8). Such a reading insidiously reinstates a biographical narrative into a collage characterized by radical disruption. As Donné observes, ultimately the texts and photographs are coded references to aspects of Debord’s life that will always remain obscure to the reader, no matter how many keys to their origins and meanings the artist provided.29 Given the explicitly self-referential nature of many texts in Mémoires, “the dirt goes away!” points equally to the idea of emptying personal memory of all prefabricated ideas—couché as a critique of postwar advertising. The radical aesthetics of the book literally enact this emptying of the cliché. Mémoires suggests that there is no such thing as a “zero point” or a blank page, reducing the notion so common to discussions of abstract painting and avant-garde literature at the time to the mundane discourse of hygiene in contemporary ads.76 A true space for reflection appears inaccessible here given the unexpected elements on each page, but the book’s visual aesthetic of emptying registers a (frustrated) desire to recreate it. Jorn’s cartoony pink blob accompanying “the dirt goes away!” also adds a scatological humor that renders the text ironic and conveys a more complex and multifaceted impact than the words alone. The insistent recreation of a master narrative by pinning down the meaning of each quote to specific Lettrist experiences counteracts the disruptive purpose and the open-ended signification of détournement.

The playfulness of first-person fragments in Mémoires also convey a humor and optimism by means of fictional elements that move them beyond any specific reference to the Lettrist experience. References to “adventure” are a recurrent cliché in the text of Mémoires that, once separated from their original context, evoke an eternal new beginning. An appropriated comic reads, “it’s incredible, such an adventure in the mid-twentieth century.” Like the Cobra artists, the Lettrists recognized the importance of comics as a way of communicating to a popular audience through simple narrative, pleasure and humor. The original Lettrist group identified comics as a kind of poly-écriture combining the different registers of writing and images.27 The more outlandish the tale or cartoon referenced in the books, the more appropriate it was to convey a trace of optimism, precisely because the fictional story lacks any pretense to narrative truth. As they are détourned, the nostalgic texts in first person appear less authentic, the fictional ones more authentic. Where a straightforward description only appears cliché in its fragmented form, a fictional text is able to convey by means of allegory a real emotion according to the reader’s interpretation. The interpretive work necessitated by the fiction demands that readers interpret the deeper emotional meanings for themselves. The book suggests, therefore, the way memory can only be communicated dialogically.

Mémoires conveys a real sense of adventure not only through fictional elements, but also in the exuberance of Jorn’s visual additions. Most readings of the book utterly disregard the visual significance of the ink abstractions. Yet they, too, convey a playfulness and even optimism in their critique. They are relics of Debord’s short-lived collaboration with Jorn.
Disorienting structures

*Mémoires* activates the reader both psychologically and physiologically with its visual dynamism and violent colors. Although Debord stated that the book was made entirely of preexisting elements, Jorn contributed the project’s original visual components. The ink marks are more physically disorienting than the texts, as they seem to fly, flow, drag, or scatter in all directions. These abstractions short-circuit the reader’s attempts rationally to comprehend the texts by making reading a vivid, mischievous, sometimes even destructive process. An ink-blot on one page deliberately evokes the Rorschach test, defined by its requirement that meaning is entirely dependent on the viewer’s interpretation.

The “supporting structures” focus us insistently on the momentary, physical experience of the work and make quiet contemplation impossible. Repeatedly, texts in *Mémoires* are crumpled as in a trash bin, and the ink produces violent, graffiti-like scratches that not only destroy the legibility of the text, but also seemingly attack the page itself. The printed ink marks present a grammar of abstract form, from spindly connecting structures to blobs, blots, spills, scrapings, stains, and pours. Jorn’s violent, funny and scatological marks are the polar opposite of virtuosic gestures. Their printed nature parodies the gestures of abstract drawing just as *Fin de Copenhague* parodies painting. In both cases, the forms relate directly to the abstract artwork of Jorn and reveals how his formal vocabulary itself resists the norms of lyrical abstract expression in drawing and painting at the time.

On the last two-page spread of *Mémoires*, visual gestures take precedence in a vivid display of yellow ink splatters on the left and blue negative splatters and pen scratches on the right (Color Plate 12). Only a few texts appear here, including the phrase from Montesquieu, “these very details, I have not given them all; for, who could say everything, without a mortal ennui?” It appears just below a particularly bold yellow ink form, like a caption. The yellow page is bordered with a gradient into vivid red along the left-hand edge of the page, the blue page with a vivid green into yellow at the book’s gutter. The two bands of color appear to glow, lending the book an almost magical air of invisible reflections and concealed secrets. A single final page follows this sequence, on which Baudelaire’s phrase “I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century” appears on top of an amorphous red form that almost hangs from the upper edge of the page by a ropelike line. Debord closes the book, then, with an appropriated note of wistful pride. Yet the final word in *Mémoires* is given to this mute blob of red ink that seems to evaporate off of the blank page at its lower edge, suggesting a physical connection to the atmosphere of the reader.

Jorn’s forms are deliberate sensory provocations. They suggest ambiguous, sometimes conflicting meanings in the same form, insisting on the viewer’s active reading. While Debord’s collaged fragments radically shift our conception of memory from something representable in a cohesive, narrative
format to something much more abstract and shifting, Jorn’s vividly colored splatters focus us insistently on the momentary experience of perception that on the one hand interferes with comprehension, and on the other, becomes a process of reading. Their fragmentation and abstraction seem to liberate the reader from the clichés of nostalgia and desire, and the authoritative discourses of postwar sociology and urbanism (even including that produced by the Situationists themselves). All of these are set adrift on the white page, alternately a dystopian receptacle for clichés where true reflection seems impossible, and a floating utopia of liberated thought. Jorn’s dynamic marks tip the scale toward the latter, ever so slightly.

The SI, in general, was not interested in arguing over memories of the past. They saw themselves instead as “partisans of a certain future of culture, of life.” Jorn’s marks, in particular, make clear that the tendency of mainstream visual culture to subsume the past and future into an endless series of spectacular presents was directly related to the retreat from politics in postwar abstract painting. The expanding need for both public and private commemoration after the horrific events of the war not only placed new demands on the memoir as a genre; it also rendered the modernist canvas increasingly problematic as a site of authentic expressions of memory. Before and after he collaborated on Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires, Jorn worked on his most monumental painting, Stalingrad, No-Man’s Land, or the Mad Laughter of Courage, dated 1957–60–67–72, the years Jorn reworked the painting (Fig. 4.9). With its near-total abstraction into a field of white, its own once-colorful imagery repeatedly crossed out by a series of marks resembling erasures, Stalingrad is a radical negation of monumental images of commemoration in the mass media.

The massive scale of Stalingrad’s visual negation subverts the public scale of postwar modernism so familiar in the grand scale of Abstract Expressionism and Informel, movements that turned personal emotion into painterly spectacle. The painting appears almost nihilistic in its refusal of any of the usual painterly means of visual expression (such as brushwork or plays of color). It even refuses Jorn’s typical semi-abstract imagery in favor of a radical abstraction. It directly opposes the contemporary manifestations of history in photography and film that were steadily replacing history painting as vehicles of public commemoration.

The original title, Le fou rire (Mad Laughter), is scrawled on the back of the painting, pointing to the meaninglessness and absurdity of sentiments of any kind when expressed on a grand public scale. Jorn began Stalingrad as an abstract picture with little or possibly no relation to the battle of Stalingrad, a debacle in the harsh winter of 1943 in which the Soviet victory over Hitler’s army turned the tide of the war, but only after hundreds of thousands died of battle wounds, starvation, and exposure. Jorn’s friend Umberto Gambetta, the caretaker of his house in Albisola, had fought for the Italian Fascist army in the battle and survived. Gambetta’s tales of its horror profoundly affected Jorn, and he decided to turn the painting into his own Guernica. Picasso’s
famous mural had a vivid impact on Jorn when he saw it in process in the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 World Exposition in Paris. It responded directly to the Fascist bombing of an innocent Basque village on market day. Picasso conveys the sheer tragedy and destruction symbolically through the black and white palette and the fragmented figures of a fallen classical hero, a mother and child, a wounded horse, a crazed bull, flames, and swords, all beneath a single glowing light bulb in the shape of an eye that bears witness to the events in all their horror.

Jorn later told Guy Atkins that unlike Picasso, he “wanted to make a painting that would be an action rather than portraying an action.” The primary action in the final painting is one of erasure and negation. Jorn reworked the imagery several times, most significantly between 1958 and 1960, when he decided after the canvas was already hanging on the wall of a collector’s home to obliterate the initial colorful figures by covering the canvas with a layer of grayish white and khaki. He later added black patterned marks to it after viewing a television documentary on the battle in 1972, which reproduced the photographs and films taken by soldiers at the front. Jorn said that he wanted to “paint bullets on it,” and “bring it closer to its title.” These additions create a haunting impression of burned-out buildings. They serve as a reminder that history painting has now been replaced by photojournalism. No longer a universal public vehicle of remembrance, monumental painting in Jorn’s hands becomes a hybrid history-memory painting. It suggests a troubled response to the truth claims in public representations of history, including both eyewitness accounts such as memoirs and visual documents such as photographs and films. Only tenuously related to these historical documents,
however, the painting raises uncomfortable questions about the present more than the past, not least of which might be: in a society that uses monumental imagery to legitimize an unjust social structure, how can we trust images any more at all?

*Stalingrad* is a particularly Adornian statement that seems to imply the impossibility of expression itself after the unprecedented tragedies of the war. It points equally, however, to the ongoing deployment of images as propaganda that the Situationists denounced, such as the daily manipulations of subjectivity in the mass media or the circulation of racist imagery surrounding contemporary events like the War of Independence in Algeria or the Watts Rebellion in Los Angeles. The painting situates us not at the triumphant end of the war, but rather right in the middle of its most destructive and hopeless battle, which it yet refuses to show. Like *Mémoires*, the painting is about the impossibility of public expressions of memory in an era of spectacle. It complements *Mémoires* in developing a Situationist understanding of the suppression of history in modernist painting and the official recuperation of memory in the rhetoric of objective truth that characterized the postwar approach to documentary. 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 in the 1930s, before the onset of the contemporary memory industry in the 1970s 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, *Mémoires* with Jorn’s more typical playfulness and humor, elements rarely encountered in the later work of Debord.

**Défourned paintings**

In May 1959, less than a year after *Mémoires*, Jorn exhibited his first “Modifications,” the alterations of flea market paintings, in the show of “*Peintures détournées*” (Défourned Paintings) at Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris. A second show of more figural Modifications called “New Disfigurations” followed in 1962, which included *The Avant-Garde Won’t Give Up* (See Fig. I.1). Along with *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires*, the SI declared Jorn’s idea of altering found paintings with graffiti-like additions a prime example of détournement. Jorn described these exhibitions in a letter to Debord as a commercial “disaster”—but in Situationist terms this only proved their critical success. Debord responded that the failure was honorable, and that it might even be beneficial for the market value of Jorn’s paintings to drop. From a strict Situationist point of view, the Modifications seem to utterly devalue painting by rendering it a series of clichés as meaningless as the fragments in *Fin de Copenhague* and *Mémoires*. Yet this reading falters in that Jorn’s painterly additions indicate respect and playful humor as much as violence toward the imagery they are purportedly defacing.
The Modifications developed out of experiments Jorn began in the Cobra period, themselves related to numerous Surrealist precedents. In 1959 they resurfaced in the context not only of Situationist détournement, but also in the renewed exploration of the readymade object as an alternative to painting. Similar Modifications were made by Italian artist Enrico Baj, who began the Modifications in Jorn’s company, and Nouveau Réaliste Daniel Spoerri, who made his own versions using found objects at the same time.

The Modifications relate to Jorn’s complex notion of “revaluation,” the celebration of anonymous creativity in combination with an acerbic critique of art as a high-end profession. They operate as oppositional practices not only to modernism, but also to an increasingly institutionalized avant-garde that had by the late 1950s become inseparable from modernism itself. Jorn’s Modifications were neither modernist nor iconoclastic in the ultra-avant-garde Situationist sense. They considered anonymous painting a form of folk creativity unfairly marginalized from the discourses of both modernism and the avant-garde, both now equally aligned with social elitism and outmoded conceptions of artistic progress.

In the French art world of the 1950s, galleries resuscitated prewar clichés of individual expression, and critics argued over whether abstract art had become academic. Modernism in all forms was turning into the liberal, ultra-individualist, increasingly American discourse of “high modernism.” The annexation of avant-garde strategies to official culture exemplified a process the Situationists called “récupération.” The SI developed détournement precisely to combat its institutional counterpart, recuperation. The two are mirror images of each other, a sort of hinge between authority and subversion. They reveal the dialectical nature of power, which must be incessantly re-established through struggle. According to Situationist theory, recuperation operates on all fronts: in advertising, in academics, in public political discourse, in the art world. The SI responded to the inevitability of recuperation with the only possible strategy, the demand that all cultural production “contain its own critique.”

The only expression resistant to recuperation and thus in any way authentic was the “détourned expression” exemplified in the artist’s books and the Modifications. The Situationists claimed that the Modifications demonstrated sheer “indifference to a meaningless and forgotten original.” Yet Jorn’s own view of expression was more complex. Jorn’s copious writings attest that indifference was a concept he adamantly opposed. He writes that the definition of art is agitation, something emphatically subjective and diametrically opposed to scientific objectivity. He specifies that far from indifference, art means desire, enthusiasm, inspiration, even fanaticism and intolerance. The Modifications, then, are meant to inspire our active sympathy or antipathy—it hardly matters which, as long as they move us.

As in the two books, in the Modifications Jorn also introduced original elements, painterly additions that he would have considered expressive forms. In The Worrisome Duck (Fig. 4.10), they manifest as a giant monster rising out of the muck, defacing the cozy landscape underneath.
Jorn’s additions transgress the previously finished canvas, producing a new state of perpetual un-finish. They attack painting’s relationship to skill, its implications of totality, and its separation from the realm of everyday life. The works he painted on, meanwhile, exemplified a traditional approach to painting that was increasingly available in the 1950s through the mass distribution of both paintings themselves and painting instruction of all kinds. The return to academic techniques in serial productions or amateur painting embraced the Western artistic models rejected by modernism, characterized by representational skill, plausible space, and preindustrial subjects welcomed by urban consumers for their primitivist escapism. The found painting underneath the Worrisome Duck was likely a work made in an assembly-line process, in which each artist paints one aspect of the scene over and over, the last one adding an invented signature, to produce a series of virtually identical simulacra of original art. Enrico Baj observed of the similar scenes used in his own Modifications that, “in fact, it’s skilled painting, cliché upon cliché, that’s sold in supermarkets.” Jorn’s duck does not destroy this scene but emerges right out of it. Its humor reaches out to the viewer,
who becomes a live participant. The dialogue of these aesthetically opposed elements celebrates, in the end, the heterogeneous possibilities of creative expression in a complex society.

Jorn began his Modifications in Paris, and many of his found canvases display scenes derived from all manner of European painting genres, mostly painted in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries (although some are much older) only to arrive in the flea market. They include French peasant scenes, British picturesque landscapes, German Romantic landscapes, Neo-Classical nudes, Orientalist scenes, heroic battle scenes, military or petit bourgeois portraits, erotic portraits, Baroque-style mythic heroes, Symbolist fantasies, and Impressionist landscapes and cityscapes. While the first group of détourned paintings consisted mostly of playful landscapes like The Worrisome Duck, the “Nouvelles défigurations” of 1962 were often more sinister. They included eight détourned female images grouped as “La Belle et la bête humaine” (Beauty and the Human Beast), seven male mythic heroes or battle scenes under the heading “Adieu héroïsme artisanal” (Adieu Artisanal Heroism), and nine assorted images noted as “Imageries anecdotiques de la vie quotidienne” (Anecdotal Imagery of Everyday Life). The latter included The Avant-Garde Won’t Give Up as well as several rather nasty détournements of bourgeois portraits. Baj recalls that when he and Jorn regularly visited flea markets together from around 1955 to 1959, he compared the kitsch paintings they found there to the late figurative paintings of Picabia that were considered equally kitsch (alimentaire) at the time. Picabia’s example directed Baj and Jorn toward the more playful side of Dada: “an art of negation, but a negation that was smiling and jovial.”

Jorn’s own self-professed “love for sofa painting” was an explicitly ironic statement for the “Peintures détournées” exhibition, but its irony was directed less at the pictures themselves than at the increasingly celebratory commercial language of the high-end art gallery that normally excluded them.

Jorn would buy old paintings on his travels in Italy, France, Holland, Germany, and England, sometimes shipping them to his collection in Silkeborg for future use. Several “unpainted Modifications” remain in storage at the Museum Jorn. Perhaps the most interesting of these forgotten finds is a fragment of a panoramic history painting depicting the Franco–Prussian war, painted in 1883 by the prominent military painters Alphonse de Neuville and Edouard Detaille. The monumental panorama was exhibited in specially built pavilions in Paris, London, and Berlin in the 1880s, but was later cut into 115 pieces and sold (Fig. 4.11).

The full mural depicted the aftermath of the Battle of Gravelotte, a massive French defeat instrumental in the nation’s loss to Prussia in the Franco–Prussian war. One pre-First World War account refers to this series of battles in August 1870, in which tens of thousands of men were killed, wounded, or missing, as the “bloodiest that have been recorded in history.” The battlefield scene Jorn found is just a fragment of the intensely patriotic panorama depicting soldiers lying dead on the field; the entire mural glorified the heroic efforts...
of individual soldiers in the face of a humiliating French defeat. Divorced from all context of the larger war and its political justifications, the fragment may have appealed to Jorn because, like the soldier’s accounts of Stalingrad, it exposes the real violence behind nationalist claims to glory, the truth of war’s toll on the powerless individual, and the spectacular nature of the modern political myths of victory and social progress. The picture’s utter failure to convey the totalizing vision of triumphant history painting is palpable in its senseless isolation of a small group of realistic dead soldiers and horses, their mangled bodies cruelly disassembled in the grass. The fragmentary nature of this vision appears in the very surface of the picture, in a gash cutting into the scene from upper right. The scene presents a piercing glimpse into the failure of monumental history painting to reconcile past defeats into nationalist glory in the twentieth century, just as Communist artists in both East and West were attempting to resuscitate the genre.

We can only guess why Jorn never took the time to modify this scene; likely he was occupied by some other interest. It is possible that the painting’s stark vision of fragmentation and defeat conveyed his subversive message as powerfully as any added graffiti could have. Did he feel that humor would have been inappropriate in a tragic scene that already appeared to critique the modern war machine? Whatever Jorn’s original plan for the picture, the Neuville and Detaille painting demonstrates the expansive nature of his interest in historical painting in the Modifications series. The series was fundamentally about not the destruction of painting, but its proliferation in heterogeneous forms arising out of different historical moments, once viewed as mutually exclusive, but now coexisting in a state of mutual marginality that gives them new critical power. These odds and ends, as so many artists have recognized both before and after Jorn, are permanent reminders that old
artistic methods and imagery do not die, but may continually resurface as contemporary alternatives and provocations.

Jorn had the subversion of outmoded painting practices in mind when he began his first Modifications on art reproductions in the Cobra period. He produced several Modifications in 1949, including an over-painting of an image of Raphael’s famous angels on a commercial postcard comparable to Duchamp’s 1919 graffiti on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa in L.H.O.O.Q. (Fig. 4.12). Where Duchamp was more interested in the outmoded status of painting as personal expression, however, Jorn celebrates an oppositional form of outsider expression. Jorn added schoolboy doodles of glasses, horns, monsters, and other scribbles to a group of postcards of famous artworks including works by Dalí, Manet, and Renoir. In 1950, he wrote to Constant of his idea to create what he called “La Section d’amélioration des anciennes toiles” (The Section for the Improvement of Old Canvases), for which these works were experimental prototypes. He specified then that their function would be positive, in order to preserve the “actualité” of old pictures and save them from oblivion. But Jorn also referred to his artistic additions as “saletés” (dirtyings), emphasizing their Dada-inspired materialist transgression.

Where Duchamp’s doodle on the Mona Lisa was eminently Dada in its total reduction of art-making to a cerebral joke, Jorn’s Modifications invoke humor as a creative response. Unlike Duchamp, Jorn originally had painting in mind, using reproductions at first only for expediency. Duchamp denounced painting in favor of a conceptual approach, calling Dada “an extreme protest against the physical side of painting.” He asserted that, “the direction in which art should turn [is] to an intellectual expression, rather than to an animal expression.” By contrast, Jorn embraced the unrefined physicality of painting as an attribute of the untrained and uncultured “human animal.”

Although directly inspired by Duchamp’s famous gesture, Jorn believed in painting’s continued creative potential, and in the ability of art to revalue outmoded traditions.

His Modifications form part of a lineage of Surrealist over-paintings by major artists like Ernst and Miró as well as less well-known late Surrealist projects by Georges Hugnet and Henri Goetz. Jorn’s interest in an artistic dialogue with an older artist who becomes a kind of anonymous collaborator may have more in common with Ernst’s palimpsest paintings than Duchamp’s Readymades. In works like The Master’s Bedroom of c. 1920, Ernst used over-painting combined with collage in order to superimpose hitherto unrelated images in new works. The over-paintings are uniformly marked by their hallucinatory legibility even though the meaning of their fantastic imagery remains mysterious and nonsensical, as in the strange juxtaposition of whale, bear, and bed in a dizzyingly perspectival space in The Master’s Bedroom.

In its reconfiguration of the artist’s role, however, Jorn’s attempt at a vulgar de-valorization of found paintings differed from Ernst’s attempt to make found imagery into a visionary representation. Whereas Ernst’s writings stressed the artist’s role in hallucinating or divining these unexpected images,
Jorn rejected the psychological and mystical framework of Surrealism. In typically Bretonian, mystical language, Ernst described collage as the “miracle of the total transfiguration of beings and objects with or without modification of their physical or anatomical aspect.” Jorn would object strenuously to such metaphysical discourse. He also disparaged the illusionism of Surrealist art, referring to the late painting of Dalí and Ernst as “dream photography.” He said that Surrealism attempted to visualize concepts in a process of reflection, instead of asserting thought’s direct relationship to the body through interaction with matter. Jorn’s Modifications demonstrate his own interest in gestural brushwork. His chaotic brushstrokes and dripped paint look like ordinary gestures, not visionary acts. In the 1949 works, Jorn refrained from over-painting the reproductions, instead adding playful ink marks to their surfaces. The marks personalize and vulgarize the “readymade” images. They reconfigure the artistic gesture into something untutored and populist, jubilant critiques much like graffiti. These gestures make Surrealist automatism a more material process, rather than the cerebral anti-art gesture of Duchamp or the visionary illusionism of Ernst.

Late Surrealist works on found images by Miró, Goetz, and Hugnet also directly anticipate Jorn’s more figurative “Disfigurations.” Miró painted several modifications of found paintings in 1944, 1950, and 1965. Jorn may have encountered a Miró over-painting such as Personnage dans la nuit of 1944 in the Pierre Loeb Gallery. The work is a male painted portrait turned on its side and paired with a large abstract Miró figure with a phallic nose.  

![Image of Jorn's Untitled (Raphael's Angels), ca. 1949. Ink on commercial postcard, 9 x 14 cm. Collection Troels Jorn, Copenhagen](image-url)
Some of Jorn’s Modifications are also turned on their sides (a technique also used by Symbolist James Ensor). Jorn shared Miró’s appreciation of everyday creativity as shown by their mutual interest in ceramics. Just as in Miró’s Personnage, the Modifications make the academic technique of anonymous painters look like a quaint sort of modern craft.

Perhaps Jorn also knew about the series of paintings on museum reproductions of eighteenth-century paintings Henri Goetz produced in 1938, called “Chefs-d’oeuvres corrigés” (Corrected Masterpieces). His grotesque heads and bodies sporting strange wounds or cyclopean protuberances directly anticipate Jorn’s Disfigurations. Goetz and his wife Christine Boumeester were friends of Jorn, part of an active social circle in the postwar ferment of artistic activity in Paris that produced Cobra. The studio of French Cobra artist Jean-Michel Atlan, a major meeting place for artists of different tendencies and movements, was next to theirs; they were close to Christian Dotremont as well.

Other “modifications” were produced just at the moment of Cobra by Surrealist Georges Hugnet, in his series of collages of monstrous figures interacting with pinups called “La vie amoureuse des spumifères.” These appeared in 1947–1948, merely a year or two before Jorn’s first Modifications. Hugnet painted colorful gouaches of monstrous birds, serpents, and other fantastic creatures onto black and white pinup images, suggesting Ovidian couplings of human and mutant. Like Jorn’s works, they play on the desecration of images of female beauty, although Jorn’s Disfigurations also ridicule images of male authority. Hugnet’s series was also a critique of high culture given his original intentions to create one “Spumifer” for each of the 40 members of the literary Academie Française. The Hugnet images do not attack the idea of “high art” visually, however; they remain playful works on paper linked only allegorically to the world of culture. Their diminutive size productively relates to typically Surrealist themes of illicit sexuality and the personal fetish.

Jorn’s larger Modifications reconfigure the artistic gesture into something secondary, untutored, critical, and popular, a knee-jerk response to a preexisting image. They reject the newness of the commodity in favor of a subjective encounter with a devalued popular expression. They are artistic collaborations across time, celebrating anonymous creativity and amateur methods. Their enduring relevance lies in their potential as exemplary tactics to trigger new and more sophisticated actions against the institutional discourse of art today, with its continuing tendency toward elitism based on the economic power of the market and the exclusivity of academic discourse. They reflect a sophisticated, post-Dada understanding not only that the art world is poised to recuperate even the most radical methods, but also the Situationist insight that the power of art world institutions is deeply enmeshed with broader structures of economic and political power. The Modifications reject modernism’s claims to autonomy and originality as complicit with the power structures of the advertising industry, the mass media, and the national institutions that promoted famous abstract painters.
as the new superstars of expressive freedom, thus alienating the creativity of everyone else. They also oppose the avant-garde notion of progress upheld by the orthodox Situationists themselves, who eventually came to label all art “anti-Situationist.” It was the rigidity of this conception that would drive Jorn out of the SI and on to new projects in 1961.

Exiting the SI

Debord wrote in 1961, four years after his “Report on the Construction of Situations,” that neither the “cultural avant-garde” nor a revolutionary party could accomplish the destruction of alienation necessary to liberate everyday life. That would demand a “new type of revolutionary organization” that he conceived as both post-artistic and post-political. At the 1961 Situationist conference in Göteborg, the SI excluded Jorn’s brother Jørgen Nash and the German Gruppe Spur artists, people Jorn had encouraged to join the SI and the last artists left in the organization after a series of exclusions. Jorn did not need a weatherman to tell him which way the wind was blowing; he had already withdrawn from the SI earlier that year, though he published a few more Situationist articles under the pseudonym George Keller. Raoul Vaneigem famously declared in Göteborg that there was no such thing as a Situationist work of art. Yet it is rarely acknowledged that his rhetoric continues to allow for the possibility of artistic experience. Vaneigem writes that, “In order for their elaboration to be artistic in the new and authentic sense defined by the SI, the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art. There is no such thing as situationism or a situationist work of art or a spectacular situationist.” In typical avant-garde fashion, the SI replaces the term “art,” in their view corrupted by its own institutionalization, with other terms like “the elements of the destruction of the spectacle.” Nevertheless, since art is a social institution, the declaration that art is dead could no more kill it than Dada could.

The Situationists are famous for their assertion that the fundamental production of an avant-garde should be not material works, but “an attempt at a general critique of the present moment.” A range of writers have recently claimed the SI as the only true postwar avant-garde because their critique went further than any other, to the point of seeming to discard art altogether. The Situationists cannot, however, be exempted from the classic avant-garde problematic of declaring art dead while continuing to produce works. SI objects in the form of films, journals, books, collages, and paintings literally mediate our understanding of what the collective was and did. Some of these aesthetic objects were made after the supposed rejection of art, as in the works of Debord, Michèle Bernstein, and J.V. Martin presented at the “Destruktion Af RSG-6” exhibition of 1963 and its follow-up show in 1967. These works included Debord’s “Directives,” slogans written in hand-painted capital letters on canvas, and Bernstein and Martin’s
“anti-abstract” paintings. The SI actually followed a joint strategy of producing works that critique the reified status of art and developing active interventions in the non-art world. In the end, the SI inherited rather than transcended the legacy of the avant-garde as a social institution. Their rejection of art for experiential critical activity became, along with happenings, performance, and New Wave cinema, inevitably recuperated as art.

With a shifting group of participants, the orthodox SI continued until 1972. Debord and Bernstein famously participated in the student occupation of the Sorbonne in May 1968, when Situationist slogans like “Under the paving stones, the beach!” filled the streets and the newspapers. The SI inspired numerous splinter groups in Europe and North and South America; perhaps their most enduring legacy is Debord’s 1967 text *La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)*, made into a film in 1973. After their expulsion from the conference table in 1961, Jørgen Nash and Jens Jørgen Thorsen went on to form a Second Situationist International that declared open membership. Jacqueline de Jong founded *The Situationist Times*, an innovative journal conceived before the split in the SI as an English-language organ, then reconceived afterwards, with Jorn’s help, as an interdisciplinary investigation of topology. The excluded artists continued to produce a variety of experimental works in and around journals like *Spur*, *Drakabygget*, and *The Situationist Times*.

Jorn chose a potlatch of continual production, acknowledging that critical moments, realizations, and expressions can occur at all stages of the process, from creation to reception. Debord, by contrast, developed increasingly pessimistic theoretical critiques, which become problematic in their refusal to admit any possibility of a critical subjectivity. In 1988, Debord wrote that there was no longer any possibility of an avant-garde: the spectacle turned revolutionaries into secret servicemen and vice versa, and art itself was long dead. Contemporary cynicism has led to a situation where, as Jacques Rancière observes, Situationist ideas have been “absorbed today into the routine of the disenchanted discourse that acts as the ‘critical’ stand-in for the existing order.” Jorn, on the other hand, continued to believe in the critical and subversive potential of subjective expression despite the power structures that socially regulate it. His statement in “Intimate Banalities” that “the spectator does not exist and cannot exist in our days” suggests that everyone has a responsibility to be aware of his or her effect on the world, in other words the individual agency that Debord’s theory would ultimately deny.

By the 1960s, Jorn was exhausted with Situationist polemics. He wrote to Debord in 1964, “My participation in the SI will be my last participation in the artistic avant-garde and its cursed [maudit] destiny will also remain my own.” The factional polemics and exclusions of the French Situationists, which repeatedly disturbed Jorn during his relationship to Debord, seem to have drained him of his already tenuous support for an avant-garde project that insisted on dictating the forward path of revolutionary progress.
From this point onward, Jorn rejected the idea of the “avant-garde” in favor of the Cobra term “experimental art.” He remained interested in collective creativity but abandoned the term “avant-garde,” which had become little more than an empty promotional label.

In a 1964 lecture, after the artists and the SI had split, Jorn summarized several key differences of his approach to that of Debord:

What one expresses through destruction is critique. Critique is a secondary reaction to something primary that already exists. What one expresses through artistic creation is joy of life. Art is primary action in relation to the unknown. The French have brought critique into the revolutionary plan, but if critique also becomes the purpose of creative art, and the creative artist therefore a “specialized worker,” whose work should only serve the permanent revolution’s permanent consumption, then these Situationists have lost any sympathetic contact with the artists who seek to create a joy of life for its own sake, and drive them precisely into the arms of the power elite, which always controls the destructive instruments that can crush the people down, and which always make sure to have a moral excuse to make it all good and thorough.

Jorn perceived Debord’s SI as going too far, so that its claims to destroy art effectively relinquished art entirely to those in power. This self-marginalization would allow art institutions to take control of the group’s historicization by default and perpetuate the very apolitical conception of art that the Situationists wanted to overturn. These institutions have also to some extent inevitably absorbed Jorn’s own oppositional painting practices and presented them as individual expressions—but the evidence of Jorn’s subversive perspective is there for anyone who cares to examine it.

In the Situationist period, the issue of painting returns as a problematic. In 1958, Jorn participated in the Situationist rejection of painting, as one author of the editorial statement in IS 2 that read, “No painting is defensible from the Situationist point of view.” But should artists still be seen as avant-garde to the extent that they reject painting? Does this not mirror the very overvaluation of painting that leads so many artists to abandon it in the first place? To single out painting as a tabooed site incapable of critique perpetuates its special status. Jorn’s project as a whole attempted to destroy the unique status of that medium by means of a jubilant critique. His Situationist books and Modifications turn painting into an anonymous medium circulating in the form of printed reproduction and graffiti, radically destabilizing existing systems of value and artistic judgment. They upgrade ephemeral ads and amateur paintings into experimental works, and lampoon lyric abstraction as an overblown cliché. They remain primary examples of Jorn’s Situationist perspective, even as he continued to use painting as a critical means, trying to free creativity from preexisting definitions of art. As Jorn explained in 1961, “We create by being in opposition to the cultural currents we meet. […] Only where power is broken is energy liberated.”
Notes


3. On Isou’s movement, see Mirella Bandini, Pour une histoire du lettrisme (Paris: Jean-Paul Rocher, 2003).


10. See also the account in Kaira M. Cabañas, “Yves Klein’s Performative Realism,” Grey Room 31 (2008), 16–27.


13. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires are mine.


17. The best description of the making of Fin de Copenhague is V.O. Permild’s account in Andersen and Olesen, Erindringer om Asger Jorn, 173–90.

18. Jorn’s Italian colleagues saw Pollock in 1950 at the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale and on exhibition in Milan. At the time, they all tried painting in enamels on the floor. Sauvage, Arte nucleare, 20, 130.


36. He wrote that the term should only be connected to a precise phenomenon: “the innumerable revolutions that happen in nature, in technology, in society, in humanity.” Jorn, “L’évolution dans l’art expérimental au Danemark de la fin de la guerre jusqu’en 1950,” text circulated by Jorn to Cobra members in 1951, published in Jorn and Alechinsky, *Lettres à plus jeune*, 94.


38. Ibid., 42.


42. See Camille Bryen à revers (Nantes: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, 1997), 209.

43. In a letter to Piet de Groof, the young critic who helped organize his exhibitions at Galerie Taptoe in Brussels in the mid-1950s, Jorn wrote, “Matta, Bryen, Wols, these people are important.” Groof, Berreby, and Orhan, *Le général situationniste*, 196.


50. See, for example, Asger Jorn, “Ole Sarvig opruller et skævt billede af kunstens stilling i dag,” *Samleren* 21, no. 1 (1944), 166–68.

51. For an examination of the gendered imagery of the SI, see Kelly C. Baum, “The Sex of the Situationist International,” *October* 126 (2008), 23–43. Baum defends the SI’s use of erotic images of women as critical *détournements*. I would argue that those images fail to accomplish the SI’s critical goals, however, because even out of context they continue to function as heterosexist images of the female body as passive object of desire.


56. Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 114.


61. Quoted in Jorn, Concerning Form, 199, where Jorn attributes the phrase to Debord in 1953.


63. For analyses of In Girum as a memoir, see Tom McDonough, “Guy Debord, The Revolutionary Without a Halo,” October 115 (2006), 39–45; and Alexandre Trudel, “Une sagesse qui ne vient jamais: esthétique, politique et personnalité dans l’œuvre de Guy Debord” (PhD dissertation, Université de Montréal, 2010), 159–78.


68. Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, scene 5, quoted in Donné, Pour Mémoires, 33. The original Shakespeare reads “Remember me? Yes, you poor ghost! From my memory, I’ll wipe away all foolish records, all advice from books, all past pressures that youth and observation put there.”


75. Donné, *Pour Mémoires*, 35.


88. “Le détournement comme négation et prélude,” 78–79.
91. Ibid.
94. Thanks to Troels Andersen for sharing his research on this piece.


113. For a recent exploration of *The Situationist Times* and *Drakabygget*, see Bolt Rasmussen and Jakobsen, eds, *Expect Everything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*.


121. Constant, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (1958), 24. The second part of this article was a response to Constant’s attacks on Jorn’s painting, written collectively after a discussion with Jorn.

Authentic ironies

The late 1950s saw the early development of the Situationist International as well as Jorn’s first international success in the art world, an ironic situation (to put it mildly) from the point of view of the SI but also one that explicitly benefited the group. Guy Atkins dubbed the period of 1956–1964 Jorn’s “crucial years.”¹ He featured along with Dubuffet in a group exhibition at Galerie Rive Gauche in 1955. In 1956, he had a solo show that received rave reviews at Galerie Taptoe, Brussels. Thanks to his friend Lawrence Alloway, the London ICA featured an exhibition of his graphics in 1957 and a mini-retrospective of paintings in 1958. Also in 1958, Jorn had solo exhibitions in Paris, Rome, Hamburg, Düsseldorf, and Munich. He was included in the group exhibitions “50 ans d’art moderne” at the 1958 Exposition Universelle in Brussels and the “Pittsburg International Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture” at the Carnegie Institute. In 1959, Jorn was included in the second international “Documenta” exhibition, curated by Werner Haftmann. He also featured along with friends Carl-Henning Pedersen and Antonio Saura, among others, in the group show “Vitalità nell’arte” at Venice’s Palazzo Grassi, a palace converted into an exhibition hall by textile magnate Paolo Marinotti, another friend of Jorn. The show then traveled to the Stedelijk, Amsterdam, and the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, which was founded in 1958. This was a manic season for someone who rarely attended art openings, refused major art-world accolades like the Eckersberg Medal (in 1962) and the Guggenheim International Award (in 1964), and according to Atkins “despise[d] public galleries because of their hindsight, bigotry, and good taste.”²

Incredibly, neither he nor his work seems to have been negatively affected by all the attention. Guy Debord writes, in his 1972 tribute: “Jorn is one of those people who is not changed by success but rather who continuously changes the stakes of success.”³ His unique relationship with the SI was itself a testament to his distance from the increasingly commercial mainstream art world with its promotion of art as an economic investment, a Cold War declaration of freedom, or a media event, transforming the radical critiques of the prewar avant-gardes into a postwar spectacle of pseudo-criticality. In contrast to such spectacular antics as Georges Mathieu’s live painting events,
Yves Klein’s claims to exhibit the pure, invisible “essence” of painting, or Karel Appel’s painting while suspended upside-down from a hovering helicopter, explicitly oppositional tactics such as Situationist détournement persisted. In light of these, Jorn’s painting emerges as an avant-garde intervention camouflaged in a market-friendly format, a sort of “ribbon around a bomb,” as André Breton once described the painting of Frida Kahlo.

This chapter examines the critical and expressive operations of his mature painting: materiality, decomposition, parody, and pastiche, strategies which complicate the simple story of Jorn’s apotheosis in the commercial art world of the 1960s. These works sit uneasily on the gallery wall, their vivid materiality in paradoxical dialogue with his activist projects and intellectual currents in the wider culture. Their tensions encapsulate the uneasiness of painting’s utopian aspirations versus its social position in a drastically unequal society. These critical operations are foundational to the social nature of Jorn’s aesthetic as a whole, with its continual demand for further dialogue and / or contradiction. “Without the ability to admire and detest,” he wrote, “the human motivation for development will disappear.”

He observed that nothing new could be created without a critical attitude to things as they exist. Still, he was never interested in simple critique, but always in a positive creation, which was the origin of his conflict with the Debordian Situationists. Jorn believed, as do I, that any great art must involve both celebration and critique in dynamic tension. His best works are both expressive and subversive toward the way art institutions publicly manage personal expression. By the late 1950s, it became apparent that truth depended not only on one’s singular perspective but also on one’s control over its dissemination. The artist’s task, then, was no longer to unveil hidden truths as the early twentieth-century Expressionists attempted to do; instead, art began to explore new ways of relating to the world.

Refusing transcendence

Jorn consistently surpasses most postwar painters in the deliberate ugliness and vehemence of his painting. In the late 1950s he incorporates an imagery of decomposition developed in his ceramic experiments into paintings that seem to corrupt the transcendent painterly gestures that had come to define postwar abstraction. Jorn’s paintings are not assimilable to any renewed humanist rhetoric of genius or any representation of creativity in the media as a spectacle of individual virtuosity. They resist spectacularization through techniques of disruption—the way noise disrupts auditory communication. His dialogue between painting and ceramics attacked the purity of painting and literally brought it down to earth, emphasizing the grotesque and aleatory over the calligraphic and expressive. Jorn ridiculed gestural painting from within, producing, as he put it, “an abstract art that does not believe in abstraction.”
The painting *Il delinquente* (*The Delinquent*) (Color Plate 13) exemplifies his combination of extreme materiality with a form of gestural painting that explicitly caricatures the transcendent rhetoric of abstract painting in art criticism of the time. *Il delinquente* crosses the dripped-paint method of Pollock with the thickly material surfaces of Dubuffet and the Nuclear artists and the translucent organic fluids of ceramic glaze. Where Pollock applied the drip in looping patterns, Jorn violently drips and splashes paint onto the surface in ruddy washes evocative of mud or blood. The amorphous “bodies” of the two semi-abstract figures remain unformed, a collection of scumbled outlines under a surface spattering of grime. He replaces the virtuoso calligraphy of the pure abstract painter with the idea of the delinquent, the artist as criminal outsider that so fascinated the Situationists and the earlier avant-garde. Standing before the painting, it is hard not to see the paint spatters as abject substances whose physical qualities of liquidity and color emulate the properties of blood or even excrement, and therefore address the viewer on a visceral level that registers with the body seemingly before the brain interprets it. This abjection is tongue-in-cheek, though, matching the title’s self-conscious humor with the consciously melodramatic perception that could equate abstract paint with blood or excrement in the first place. Jorn’s painting elaborates this uniquely human tendency to create meaning through metaphor on multiple levels at once.

The satirical elements in his painting directly target the high-blown rhetoric of Informel and Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s. In Abstract Expressionism the gesture signified above all personal integrity and truth to the painter’s experience. As Irving Sandler writes, “The primary content of gesture painting was thought to be the ‘confession’ of the artist’s particular experiences—the embodiment of his unique artistic temperament.” The Parisian movement defined as “informel” and “art autre” by Michel Tapié, “tachisme” by Charles Estienne, and “abstraction lyrique” by painter Georges Mathieu, was characterized by a more hyperbolic rhetoric inspired in part by Existentialism. Informel elevated the painted gesture to the status of a transcendent action. Like Abstract Expressionism, it upheld the conception of the artist as a uniquely talented creator, transcribing on canvas a persona presented alternately as authentically introspective or spectacularly virile. European discourse also reinforced the modernist conception of artistic autonomy based on painting’s alienation from everyday life. Jorn, whose work was featured in some of Tapié’s exhibitions, became intimately familiar with this discourse in the Cobra years.

Tapié, in his writings on Informel and *art autre*, insisted on the importance of “authentic artists” of “exceptional individuality.” He described a new art about “high freedom” and unleashing “Force.” He wrote about the “violence of the gesture” and the elaboration of “signs charged with a maximum of expressivity.” The artwork was the trace of a genius subject, the explicitly Nietzschean “creator–destroyer” of art. Tapié utterly rejected all possibility of group action, claiming that only the individual had the power to act.
He actively embraced German Expressionism in a radically different way than Jorn, upholding its individualist focus and belief in what he described as an almost superhuman will to expression.\textsuperscript{12} The rhetoric of “Tachisme,” a term coined by Tapié’s rival Charles Estienne in 1954, was equally bombastic. Estienne writes in the catalogue text for the 1951 Cobra exhibition in Liège that the most important characteristic of this art is its “imperious and virile line, clear and strong like a sword.”\textsuperscript{13} He describes the gestures of painter Hans Hartung “the most naked and natural gesture through which a man would escape the anguish of his condition.”\textsuperscript{14}

Writers on both sides of the Atlantic frequently claimed that individual subjectivity transcended the social. For Andre Malraux, the most popular French critic, the primary function of modern art was the subjective expression of the artist’s psyche. He presents a history of art driven by a series of isolated individuals seeking “transcendental” forms to express their emotions.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, American artists like Motherwell, Rothko, and Newman explored the sublime and wrote of the “urgency for transcendent experience.”\textsuperscript{16} Newman asserted that the new American painting “transcends nature. It is concerned with metaphysical implications, with the divine mysteries.”\textsuperscript{17} Jorn’s interests were far from individualist transcendence, however, emphasizing instead collective creation, the social nature of signification, and the provisional nature of material experience.

Jorn did acknowledge his relationship to the creative development of Informel and Tachisme, although he critiqued their official institutionalization in the postwar period. He refers approvingly to Tachisme as a formal revolution based on concepts of “process,” “dissolution,” and even “existentialist philosophy,” noting its critical stance toward geometric abstraction, which many critics in the early 1950s saw as the new “official modernism” in Europe.\textsuperscript{18} But while he initially admired Tapié, Jorn later accused the critic of substituting a new academic art of Informel abstraction for the geometric abstraction which became prominent immediately after the war.\textsuperscript{19} When Informel came to mean only pure abstraction couched in an academic, artificial, and overtly mystical critical terminology, he rejected the term altogether.\textsuperscript{20} By the late 1950s, Jorn distanced himself outright from the rhetorical extremes of this criticism. He even refuted the term “gesture” precisely for what he described as the term’s link to an increasingly inflated “rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{21} Jorn’s painting also refuses any sort of signature style. It evolves radically over time, registering a constantly shifting persona, in a more situational conception of subjectivity.

The wide range of Jorn’s painterly approaches is apparent in the difference between \textit{Il delinquente} and \textit{Attention, Danger} of 1957 (Fig. 5.1), one of many explicitly cartoon-like works in a style relating not only to children’s art, but to finger painting as its most infantile mode. The colors, this time glaringly bright and clashing, appear in large unbalanced planar areas that seem thoughtlessly applied in thick flat parallel strokes. The picture depicts a large monster that seems to materialize out of the paint itself, looming over a smaller figure in a manner reminiscent of science
5.1 Asger Jorn, *Attention, Danger*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm. Photo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter / Øystein Thorvaldsen. Courtesy of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo
fiction or pulp comics (sources referenced in the title). The humor of the scary-monster scenario mocks the pretension of the high-art medium, while the popular subject matter is distorted or personalized through the hand of a singular producer. Rather than presenting an artistic signature, though, the brushstrokes eschew painterly skill in their shallowness and crude application. Both the work’s patently one-dimensional content and its heavily worked surface refuse psychological depth. The work replaces deep contemplation with an obvious punch line, and ties laughter paradoxically to vivid material sensation. Like many of his paintings, it is small and unassuming. Its humor makes it seem incongruous in the context of the hushed museum. Its title could also be read as a parody of a political situation—perhaps that of the avant-garde itself, cast as perpetual underdog.

Though the painting’s content derives from mass media imagery, in line with Jorn’s Cobra theory of popular art, his ambivalence about mainstream sources like Disney cartoons is evident here. Empathically hand-made, it remains strongly critical of the tendency to replace authentic popular culture with mass-produced substitutes. Rather than take up directly the Pop art strategy of pastiche, Jorn continues to explore the hand-drawn figure, but sets the figurative operation of the hand and the vividness of the material surfaces in tension with each other. Attention, Danger fosters an appreciation of the ordinary originality and humorous critique of the comic gesture in defiance of cheap heroism or commercialized transcendence.

His semi-figuration suggests folk art as much as the mass popular culture that fueled Pop art. Rather than a comic-book monster, Attention, Danger resembles a handmade decoration or children’s painting, a function of Jorn’s Helhesten and Cobra interest in making painting into a popular art. Folk art may be produced either individually or collectively, but generally bears the distinctive marks of the creative hand often combined with a collective content signified by popular motifs. It requires no investment of skill acquired through training, and only minimal economic means. As a singular object, it fosters a particular sensory experience that cannot be fully conveyed through reproduction. The personal experience it requires resists the depersonalization of mass-produced, photographic or digital reproductions. Such diverse painting strategies nevertheless manage to convey a radical multiplicity of meaning through the solid tactility of paint.

The immediacy of painting

Jorn’s painting project participated in a broader renewal of interest in the medium in the 1950s that often goes unexamined. Yet this renewed interest in painting, particularly the large-scale public expressions so typical of American Abstract Expressionism, had an important social function as a profound rejection of what critics perceived as the threatening aspects of the spread of mass-media technologies mostly experienced on a screen. He joined a wider
current of cultural critics who contrasted the material specificity of painting as the ultimate medium of sensory engagement to the alienating effects of the mass media, despite the media’s own claims to collapse distance into telesural “immediacy.” The singularity of artworks and the irreducibility of aesthetic experience became newly important to Marxist critics like Meyer Schapiro in New York, Michel Ragon in Paris, and Theodor Adorno in Germany, whose views present an important context for Jorn’s work.

In his case this was less a postwar “return” to painting than a continuation of practices he had developed since the 1930s, but they now related directly to critical theories of the mass media. Jorn’s interest in gesture was about singularity itself, meaning not an especially talented individual but rather the volatile presence of a subjectivity at a particular moment or in relation to a specific image. He valued the unique act rather than the unique individual behind it. Jorn’s emphasis on irreproducible singularity turned its back on the ideas of technological progress that the historical avant-garde had believed in so strongly before the war. He participated in the disillusionment of a postwar generation that witnessed its disastrous culmination in large-scale violence. 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.

The problem, Jorn believed, was not violence per se but its mass dissemination, for which the new visual technologies seemed at least partly to blame.

It was the postwar prominence of the mass media in the spheres of advertising, journalism, and entertainment that made the two-dimensional medium of painting take primacy once again. The spread of color photography, offset lithography, film, and television in the 1950s made technologically reproduced images suddenly ubiquitous. French critic Michel Ragon, a close friend of Jorn in the Cobra period, was one of many who at an early postwar moment set painting in direct opposition to the media’s expanding influence. In his 1951 book Expression et non-figuration, Ragon observes that his day is a time of images: televised images, cinematography, photography. He writes that the image is now more powerful than print.

For older critics like Adorno, the expansion of the mass media was a turn for the worse. Adorno identifies the expanded influence of television in particular as emblematic of the way “commercial production of cultural goods has become streamlined, and the impact of popular culture upon the individual has concomitantly increased.” He notes that the media’s “output has increased to such an extent that it is impossible for anyone to dodge them,” even the previously exempt rural communities and the educated elite. Adorno summarizes the destructive effects of mass culture on individual psychology in his statement:
Above all, this rigid institutionalization transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control. The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance.  

Jorn’s emphasis on the hand-made gesture and physical materiality is best understood in this critical framework, particularly since so many similarities exist between Frankfurt School theory and Situationist cynicism toward mass culture. The blanket nature of Adorno’s rejection does not directly parallel Jorn’s position—after all, he made ingenious use of offset printing in numerous projects with the printers Permild and Rosengreen and worked extensively with photographer Gérard Franceschi in his publishing experiments later on—but there is something in his intensive focus on the singular material gesture that broadly parallels Adorno’s theory of art as the primary sphere of opposition to mass mediation.

In the 1950s Jorn placed particular emphasis on the handmade and personal aspects of painting and drawing, extending his earlier investigations of the relationship of handwriting to pictorial art. His distrust of the prefabricated image in fact led him at first to dismiss—shortsightedly—the artistic and critical potential of photography. Jorn writes that excessive faith in the progress and objectivity of science leads to the view that photography is the best art form, because it is the most objective and realistic. But there is no objective reality even in science, he argues, since it is always tied to the needs and interests of those who fund it. Rather than make art more objective, Jorn argues for the subjectivity of science. Writing in the late 1940s, he warns of the danger of considering photography a substitute for reality, the equivalent of armchair traveling instead of real experience. Jorn argues that the close connection of photography to reality is precisely what makes it the least artistic. He was unable to see the potential of photography as a creative medium because of its associations with impersonal, mass reproduction. Jorn reductively associated photography with the culture industry (even though he would make use of it extensively in the 1960s in his photographic artist’s books). While hopelessly limited for any contemporary understanding of photography, these views were typical of the 1950s. Michel Ragon similarly describes art as a foil to a society ruled by the rational implementation of technological progress. Critiquing pro-technology critics like Marshall McLuhan, he writes: “Art is [...] anti-technicist.” Art is linked to industrial society, but as an “antidote” or a “deforming mirror,” a phrase recalling Adorno’s conception of art as a negative dialectics. These theories contextualize the development of Jorn’s belief in the importance of direct physical presence.

Jorn suggests that abstract art addresses our imagination more directly than the “indirect and superficial” art of photography. He writes that “visual art means first and foremost visual effects, and the most elementary, direct visual art is that which effects our power of imagination by means of colors, forms, and direct visual effects.” The repetition of “direct” and “visual” here makes clear his belief that painting speaks more intuitively and immediately
to the observer. Although critics often dismissed Jorn’s work as “figurative,” his painting develops figuration through a process that abstracts it, linking modernist form to popular traditions, on the one hand, and mass media imagery, on the other. Jorn’s semi-abstract process communicates a sensory experience and a social message simultaneously. What makes his approach unique is the simultaneous tension between literal materiality and imaginative reference in each painting. In Jorn’s writings of the 1950s, including Held og hasard, “Tegn og underlige gerninger,” and Pour la forme, he develops his own critique of the instrumental reason of bourgeois society by celebrating art as the unique, handmade, useless, irrational, illegible, and even impossible. Jorn celebrates art’s potential for disruption and its utter rejection of dominant codes of quality or even legibility.

Adorno, notoriously uninterested in the widespread understanding or acceptance of his ideas, writes: “art is hostile to what the jargon of authenticity calls the ‘message.’” Building on the critique of Enlightenment rationalism he developed with Max Horkheimer in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, his complex aesthetic theory views art as inherently critical due to its very autonomy from the sphere of instrumental reason. For Adorno, art is critical of the bourgeois subject’s alienation by technology in the “administered world” of the culture industry. Adorno’s analysis rejects the possibility of unmediated subjective expression for a more complicated understanding of the relationship of artistic form to social alienation. Adorno acknowledges that expression must exist but must also be mediated, “displacing, dissolving, and reconstructing” empirical reality. This conception illuminates Jorn’s understanding that the meaning of art develops experientially, in dialogue with broader social currents, rather than in a cultural vacuum. Adorno’s definition of autonomy, however, removes art further from direct social action than Jorn’s view. Jorn’s belief in the artistic importance of jubilation also contrasts strongly with Adorno’s pessimistic characterization of art as a sort of mourning for a lost social efficacy. Utterly cynical of any social effect instigated by art, Adorno writes that the inherent opposition of artworks to dominant modes of production means that they “realize themselves in their resultant downfall.” The emphasis on negation in Adorno’s theory directly opposes Jorn’s playful polemics. Despite such significant differences, though, Jorn shares the basic conception of art as an expression of singular criticality in a complex dialectical relationship to the social context out of which it develops.

Jorn’s painting moved from the Helhesten focus on harmony in the 1940s to an aesthetic of distraction and disruption in his painting of the 1950s, evoking American critic Meyer Schapiro’s idea that abstract art is more akin to “noise,” a disruption of the mediated message, than communication. Jorn appreciated art’s potential to create a rupture in the dominant ideology, specifically the hegemony of the clichéd images now presented in the mass media, as they once were in academic painting. The expansion of representational images not only in journalistic photography, cinema, and television, but also in late Surrealist and Socialist Realist painting, made abstraction newly relevant.
in the 1950s as a foil to the standard figural imagery of both high and mass culture. Because Jorn embraces the imagery of popular culture, however, and sees painting as a part of that culture, when he does explore total abstraction, it is never “pure.”

An abstract work such as *They Never Come Back* (Color Plate 14) embodies Jorn’s aesthetic of disruption in the mid-1950s. The clash of colors and marks forms an impromptu composition, featuring a central off-kilter X-axis where complex colored areas seem to confront and repel each other, reaching out toward the four corners of the canvas. Multiple incidents or nodes of activity eschew any single center point in this vertical image, which suggests an exploded or violently destroyed figure. Paint curls in wormy tendrils around and over itself until it regains momentum in less crowded areas, on a surface teeming with events and confrontations. The surging diagonal axes of the picture seem mutually to destruct in streams of energetic color. The paint appears alternately applied to the surface with finger, brush, or tube, or hurled in thinner splashes. The colors seem to rebound energetically against a hard surface, on which they blend and congeal, giving the entire work a strong effect of spontaneity. Smaller interior forms and gestures catch the eye as it seeks some spot to rest on the roiling surface, contributing to the sense of noise, interference, and distraction. The effects are so visceral that they evoke a synaesthetic cacophony of sound. One can almost hear the “splat” of wet paint hitting the surface, or the sounds of spitting or all manner of mundane bodily functions in its vulgar energy. In all respects, the intensity of the work leaves little room for contemplative, disembodied vision.

Jorn’s paintings have a way of presenting conflicting impressions at once, and read differently upon each viewing. *They Never Come Back* is not totally chaotic, but also contains areas of blue and black linear pattern or loops, here evoking ideographs or handwriting, there monstrous ribs and bone structures. These gestures seem alternately furtive or aleatory. There is a certain grace to the way the yellow field pulls away from the lower left edge and loops back, serving as a foil to the thrashing above. Even in total abstraction, his forms evoke humor and suggest social interactions. A sense of abandon, for better or worse, is evoked by the title, *They Never Come Back*, suggesting that the picture’s abstract form is an allegory for personal or social meaning. The painting demands our attention, in a physical experience impossible to communicate in reproduction.

The physical impact of *They Never Come Back* relates to Jorn’s interest in the specific reality of the viewer’s physical experience before the object. He conceived of painting as an emphatically physical object that paradoxically leads through sensory engagement to imaginative and critical action, rather than capturing “inner” feelings. Already in 1948, Jorn stated his rejection of the Expressionist idea of art in his book *Magic and the Fine Arts*. He suggests in a somewhat humorous passage that his own conception replaces authenticity of meaning with the singularity of experience:
What an artwork represents is quite insignificant. What the artist believes it represents is also insignificant. The effect the artist wanted to achieve is in itself without interest. What the observer believes he sees in the artwork is in itself insignificant. The effect he believes it has had on him is insignificant. The only thing that means something is the objective and real effect the art has exercised on the observer. That is the artistic reality.  

This emphasis on material reality, and what it does to the viewer in the moment of viewing, is the opposite of the romantic-Expressionist idea of truth, which implies a preexisting, hidden inner reality to which the external work corresponds. Jorn directly criticizes postwar theorists of aesthetics, in fact, for overemphasizing the importance of depth and truth. He reproaches the philosophers Suzanne Langer, C.K. Ogden, I.A. Richards, and John Hospers, whose aesthetic theories are closely associated with Abstract Expressionism, for their “fear of the superficial and the hollow,” and for “taking things too seriously.”  

Jorn embraced the “superficial” instead, describing art as an encounter with the unknown in which neither lie nor truth exist. He believed in expression, but he also acknowledged that different viewers could interpret it in diverse ways. Jorn openly invited conflicting interpretations by making humor and irony key elements of his aesthetic. He replaced the truth of authentic expression with the reality of materials, setting in motion a play of interpretation.

Ironic expression

Jorn’s painting emphasizes that expression involves a search for the new and unexpected rather than the externalization of inner experience characteristic of the first-generation Expressionists. This conception directly opposes the classic Expressionist idea of a simple psychic interior existing prior to its manifestations on canvas. Expressionism depended not on any particular artistic style, but rather on an authentic inner feeling that transformed the objects depicted in some way. For Jorn such assumptions about artistic intention were meaningless given their dependence on the observer’s acceptance of them; he instead embraces the unpredictability of multiple interpretations.

Critics often resist seeing Jorn’s work on its own terms, instead subsuming it into the Expressionist tradition that the work itself rejects. According to one recent review, “Jorn’s excited brushwork and heavy impasto, his high-contrast colors and dark contours asked to be read as painterly and expressive analogues for an inner necessity.”  

“Inner necessity” was Kandinsky’s term for the psychic and spiritual need that drove artists to externalize their emotional experiences on canvas. Jorn used the phrase in his early years, but in his mature work he no longer supported Kandinsky’s views. He told an interviewer in the early 1960s that, “I don’t believe in the idea of inward necessity. When I hear of inward necessity I think of indigestion and circulation of the blood.
and that sort of thing.” At this point, Jorn utterly rejects the idea of a wholly internal psyche, displacing it through deliberately visceral references to the inner workings of the body, as visible in *The Delinquent*.

The aesthetic theory he develops from the Cobra period into the 1960s dwells on concepts of irony and artifice in which the materials of the artwork are the only stable elements; Jorn invites interpretation to veer wildly in different directions. He writes that no artistic form can express a specific content all the time, because just as in speech the same form can mean both the stated content and, by use of irony, the opposite. Jorn also repeatedly stresses the basic link between art and artificiality or artifice, asserting that while the artist conveys a meaning or provokes a response in the artwork, this communication has nothing to do with truth. For Jorn, lying is more important than any concept of truth, because he considered truth utterly subjective. He writes that lies are expressions of contradiction with the existing reality. In other words, the inauthentic expressions of art embody a social critique. He also stresses that it is possible to express things that are unthinkable or indescribable, indicating that the artist’s task is also to imagine alternatives to existing realities.

Jorn conceives the art object as a public work that no longer embodies the artist’s inner experience, but instead foregrounds its status as a space of viewers’ projection. This emphasis on artifice and irony sets his work at direct odds with Informel and Abstract Expressionism.

*La double face* (*The Double Face*), from 1961 (Color Plate 15), is an exemplary painting about layers of meaning, duplicity and multiplicity, as indicated by the title. On first glance, it seems to be a picture of a massive face with an open mouth, perhaps screaming. Rather than an individual, however, it is according to the title a “double” head, and in fact at least four faces are visible. There are the large massive framing head, a smaller head floating above the large mouth and seemingly careening downwards into it, another smaller head to the lower left, and at least one more mask-like face within the larger one, in the main figure’s left eye. The large face itself disintegrates in certain areas and would scarcely be recognizable as such without the cavernous mouth. Among the sheer abstract brushwork are areas where Jorn inscribed into the paint with the end of the brush in a graffiti-like practice. Everywhere in this image he makes evident the properties of the paint itself as it manifests in a variety of brush marks scumbled, slashed, dashed, scraped, washed, wiped, squeezed, ground into, and scribbled onto the surface. This materiality again seems to resist the emergence of the imagery.

The face invites direct comparison with earlier Expressionism, characterized by the anxiety depicted in its most clichéd image, the screaming figure. Edvard Munch’s *Scream* depicts an abstracted figure on a bridge beneath a sky streaked with crimson and yellow. Munch described the experience as a vivid impression of a sunset over the Norwegian landscape: “I stood there trembling with anxiety,” he said, “and I sensed an endless scream passing through nature.” The powerful colors in primary shades and green, expressed in sinuous lines that curve around the image to connect the figure
inexorably to his surroundings, form a pictorial expression of individual anxiety. The emotion experienced by the artist seems to be directly embodied in the intensity of the pictorial elements. As Frederic Jameson observes, The Scream is the ultimate modernist depiction of the isolated individual, its outer world defined and distorted by inner emotion, above all anxiety. It implies an inner truth uncovered in the manner of a personal revelation before nature.⁴⁵

The screaming figure appears in other modernist contexts as well, such as the famous scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s film Potemkin when the nursemaid watches the carriage of the murdered baby roll down the Odessa steps. The camera close-up of her scream is punctuated by the shattered glass of her spectacles and the blood running down her cheek. The shot inspired Francis Bacon to paint his own 1950s version of a screaming head in a series of abstracted portraits of Pope Pius XII, marked by gloomy colors and a distressing armature of golden bars and black and brown vertical striations. Like Jorn’s faces, Bacon’s screaming heads alternate between figuration and disfigurement. The cancellation of a preexisting image (in Bacon’s case, the portrait of the Pope by Vélazquez) becomes a creative process. Jorn and Bacon’s screams register that we can only understand the world through preexisting images. This is a process that philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in his discussion of Bacon, refers to as the painter’s “fight against the cliché.” According to Deleuze,

Figuration exists, it is a […] prerequisite of painting. We are besieged by photographs that are illustrations, by newspapers that are narrations, by cinema images, by television images. There are psychic clichés just as there are physical clichés—ready-made perceptions, memories, phantasms. There is a very important experience here for the painter: a whole category of things that could be termed clichés already fills the canvas, before the beginning.⁴⁶

By the time Jorn painted his version of the scream, it was as much a pop culture icon as an Expressionist one. His work resists the clichés of the representation of human emotion both in the media and in modernist art by producing them ironically.

The scream or the tortured head was a common motif in the 1950s: the “head” that replaces the “portrait” with a universal depiction of brute humanity, as seen also in the work of Giacometti, Appel, Edouardo Paolozzi, and others. Jorn’s irony allows for conflicting readings of the emotional content, whereas Giacometti and Bacon present a more theatrically angst-filled postwar Expressionism in which the different possibilities for meaning depend on the existential identity and utter isolation of the figure itself. The incompleteness of Jorn’s figures—their identification with their environment and other potential figures—refuses any archetypal identification with human nature or Existentialist humanism. The scream, Jorn’s work suggests, is an ephemeral human state, not an existential condition.

Upon closer view, Jorn’s quadruple head forces us to ask: is the large face actually screaming? The three tooth-like white strokes and the red and
green reference to a tongue inside the massive mouth point in their visceral materiality to eating as much as screaming, and in fact the small face in orange and yellow appears to be headed right into that mouth in a way that is actually quite funny. The large face has a distinctly dumb facial expression, with an overly large mouth and overly small eyes (and for that matter, three or four of them). The eyes appear to be looking upward rather than at its “prey,” indicating a creature quite unaware of its odd miniature companion. The smaller faces are nothing more than barely-defined schematic masks without bodies or any substantiality. They are mere doodles playing against each other. The yellow slashes that appear like lines of motion above the “falling” head provoke comic-book associations. These slashes could also be read as a wild bit of hair standing up off the face, or alternately, as a set of marks that pin the small face to the literal surface of the picture as we might tack a cartoon to a bulletin board.

Jorn began with a process, without a sketch or any preconceived subject, allowing the material to shape the image as he went along, and when he did see a figure he would highlight it as a point of departure for the play of interpretation. In Jorn’s work, the evident speed of the brushwork is less about the directness of expression as it was for Munch or the German Expressionists. Instead, speed indicates a surrendering of authorial control to allow the physical interactions of materials to dominate (as in Abstract Expressionism). As if to drive the point home that his expressionism was something very different from that of Munch, he did another painting in 1960 titled *The Scream*, in which no figure is visible at all or only with difficulty (Fig. 5.2). Here, the work’s utter abstraction makes the scream a nonhuman effect of paint itself. Another work from the 1960s, which directly echoes the curving lines and vivid reds and yellows of the sunset in Munch’s *Scream*, Jorn called simply, *Hvisken* (*Whisper*).47 The title makes fun of all the old assumptions that vivid colors necessarily connote angst.

Some observers might see emotional anxiety in the *Double Face*, a valid interpretation, but only one of many, and impossible to relate to Jorn’s own emotional state. Literary theorist Paul de Man observes that irony makes authenticity impossible because it reflects the self as complex, split into opposing aspects that the ironic work reveals to be coexisting.48 Jorn understands this complexity of the self as a social situation, in line with his earlier development of a singular–collective expression. He writes that, “Man distinguishes himself from animals by his capacity to have interests, an interiority, and a capacity to create an interior between himself and others.”49 This suggestion completely redefines subjectivity as something in continual dialogic development. Jorn’s insistence on meaning–production as an active process reveals the way authenticity arises not from the single-mindedness of the artist’s commitment to expression, but rather the open-mindedness of an encounter with the viewer. In a complex contemporary society, this painting acknowledges the impossibility of expression as a direct message from artist
to viewer. As the understanding of Expressionism that developed historically in Northern European art became available to a more diverse global audience, it would continually gain new meanings.

**Nordic Expressionism?**

In 1959, Jorn exhibited at the Silkeborg Museum a large personal donation of works by himself, his friends, and the early twentieth-century artists he favored that would become the core collection of a new Silkeborg Kunstmuseum. Now that he had the financial resources, Jorn began augmenting the collection to share his artistic interests with his hometown. In addition to earlier inspirations such as Léger, Arp, and Ernst, he bought work by Symbolists like James Ensor, Johannes Holbek, Alfred Jarry, Jens Lund, and Odilon Redon, and Expressionists such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and Emil Nolde, all of whom Jorn considered precedents for Helhesten and Cobra. The postwar period saw a major revival of interest in German
Expressionism as a movement shut down by the Nazis, and the increasing attention to earlier Expressionism led Jorn to reevaluate his own relationship to that lineage. This was also the moment he began showing in Munich, where he was exposed to German Expressionists like Lovis Corinth at the height of their artistic reappraisal in postwar Germany. It is important to understand the specific historical situation that led Jorn to describe himself as a Nordic Expressionist at this particular time, given the overt resistance in his work to both cultural nationalism and Expressionist aesthetics in general.

Jorn writes in the 1950s and 60s of a Nordic Expressionist lineage of modernism, asserting for example that Edvard Munch and Emil Nolde helped bring Scandinavian art to the forefront of modern art. This lineage helped him to promote Scandinavia as a site of artistic innovation and to historicize his own work, and it asserted a Scandinavian as opposed to German Expressionist canon; it also deliberately left out some of the most significant artists in Scandinavia, from Golden Age painter C.W. Eckersberg to Jorn’s Linien colleague Richard Mortensen, who pioneered a unique form of organic hard-edge abstraction after the Second World War. His development of this lineage must be understood as a strategic attempt to define an autonomous Nordic contribution to artistic developments in the 1950s. This newfound interest in historical Expressionism—a movement from which Jorn had adamantly dissociated himself in the 1930s and 40s—directly relates to contemporary artistic and political discussions. These included a nationalist tendency in French criticism to resist Expressionism as a perceived foreign movement, which helped to marginalize Cobra in the Parisian art world. Perhaps more important was the rise of Abstract Expressionism as an American phenomenon, which he felt denied the Nordic origins of Expressionism. In the early 1960s, Jorn writes that America overlooked Cobra because they claimed to have invented Abstract Expressionism themselves, and far from moving to acknowledge the European movement, they were busy defending themselves from the onset of Neo-Dada. He also describes how the French Nouveau Réaliste critic Pierre Restany directly dismissed his account of the development of an autonomous form of Abstract Expressionism in Denmark, responding that Scandinavia was nothing but an uncultivated and barbaric place, inhabited by a bunch of “lazy slouches” (ugidelige slapsvanse) without any morality. Clearly, Jorn’s encounters in Paris directly inspired his defense of a marginalized cultural tradition.

In the 1960s, he took part in debates that consumed the Scandinavian Left about the role of the Nordic countries in Europe’s new political structure, and the anxiety he shared about the threat of the larger European nations to Scandinavian culture is another important background to his interest in Nordic Expressionism. After years of focusing on international developments abroad, Jorn renewed his attention to Scandinavia in response to the questions of its participation in the bourgeoning European Community or EC, the economic predecessor to the EU. Many Leftist intellectuals feared losing Danish political independence in the face of the “superpower states” of Europe. Many prominent Leftists worried that key tenets of the Nordic
welfare state would be threatened by the liberal–capitalist policies of the larger member countries. The identity of Denmark as a Nordic country was a key element of these debates. Jorn explains in 1961,

The question of there being anything Nordic in art to keep watch over, meant to me whether or not it was better to leave everything alone. But then the politicians in Norway and Denmark demanded that we should give up our sovereignty and enter into a union of “European” states. […] Today we say: Can our art defend the Nordic against extermination?

He wrote prolifically about contemporary politics and culture in the Danish press in this period, asserting an autonomous cultural identity for the Northern countries in order to oppose the impending entry of Denmark into the EC. (After years of heated debates, Denmark officially joined the EC in 1973). Jorn’s comments on Nordic identity in this period, then, were polemical reactions to contemporary politics.

He wrote several theoretical books in the 1960s that addressed the Nordic tradition, in which he makes some of his most essentializing statements about Scandinavian identity, which have distorted our understanding of his relationship to historical Expressionism. In Alfa og Omega (Alpha and Omega), Jorn discusses the importance of the Nordic artistic lineage. He writes:

Nordic art is a dangerous art … because it concentrates all its power in ourselves. It is not an art that gathers around the enjoyment of the direct emotivity of sensory impressions. Neither is it an art which speaks to objective perception through a clear and conscious symbolism. The Danish author Jakob Knudsen has probably touched on the essential point when he says that Nordic art […] is the expression of mind [sind] and affects the mind more than the senses and perception and is thus a symbolically informal and anti-symbolic art.

He also writes in the 1960s that Nordic culture is marked by moodiness, craziness, and greater originality than either Latin or what he calls “Byzantine” culture. These categorizations are outdated and limiting, and their essentialism should be recognized. They draw on a long history of European characterizations of Scandinavia that Scandinavian writers then turned around to claim as a unique heritage. Equally important, they are Jorn’s polemical response to the European Union debates. The ironic and often contradictory nature of his statements must also be taken into account, because the straightforward discussion of cultural identity was an anomaly in his writing. Jorn more often treats identity as something complex and situational, developing dialogically in a social environment; and this is the understanding of subjectivity conveyed in his artwork.

The question of a Nordic lineage quickly becomes misleading in understanding his work because it collapses his concerns into those of earlier artists. In the early twentieth century, Expressionism was the major name for modernist art in Scandinavia, referring to every modernist tendency from Fauvism to Cubism and Dada. Praising Jorn as a Nordic Expressionist is
therefore misleading outside the Nordic countries, and it quickly becomes a distortion of what is actually going on in the work. In fact it has served to marginalize him from discussions of international art history. For most of his career, Jorn worked to develop international contacts and created his theories in the context of the diverse avant-gardes he co-founded. Notably, the ideas he emphasizes in the 1960s were the same concepts he wrote about in the 1950s, without asserting that they were particularly Scandinavian: the concept of the artist as an experimenter, art-making as disruption and disorder, the emphasis on the subjective nature of reality, emotional excess as a conduit to greater understanding, art as something that develops collectively rather than individually, and the artist as a discoverer of the new. Jorn’s art of danger and dreaming became “Nordic” and “Expressionist” at a particular historical moment for extra-aesthetic reasons.

The passage from Alfa og Omega explains something important about his own art, and not Nordic art in general. It tells us that Jorn is concerned neither with pure sensory expression, as in traditional Expressionism, nor with rational order, associated with Classicism, Constructivism, and Functionalism. His art involves a third way that operates beyond this opposition, or as Jorn himself put it: “No Sturm, No Drang.” It values both emotional and rational content, but relies on the materials themselves to develop the “expression,” a concept that, like spontaneity, can only be interpreted retroactively by the observer.

A Soul for Sale

In Jorn’s semi-figurative painting, images remain locked in the sensuous materials of painting, situating the observer in a present action of seeking meaning. Rather than pointing to painting’s autonomous existence as a medium, Jorn mobilizes it as a social mediator to inspire our active participation in the world. His work responds directly to Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism not only on the level of aesthetics but also reception, the social and political context of the artwork. Consider, for example, Jorn’s monumental 1958 painting Ausverkauf einer Seele (A Soul for Sale) (Color Plate 16), in which one or more monstrous faces, depending on one’s perspective, coalesce and threaten to dissolve in paint.

The painting is larger than his typical work and from a distance appears more emphatically gestural, with its relatively sedate balance of colors and brushwork combined with the Pollock-like drips applied relatively decoratively across the surface. Jorn was able to produce such larger works when the young dealer Otto Van de Loo gave the artist a studio in his home in Munich. Throughout the 1960s, Jorn would gratefully make use of Van de Loo’s generous hospitality, enjoying the rare chance to shut himself up for a few days or weeks in pure isolation and paint; Jorn produced some of the most significant paintings of his career there. In a photo from his first visit, he poses with Van de Loo in the garden, the near-finished Ausverkauf einer Seele casually hung up on a nail in the windowsill like an item for sale on the street (Fig. 5.3).
Jorn brought it outside, it turns out, not only to get a better look at the large canvas from a distance (he didn’t have enough room in Van de Loo’s attic to step back from it), but also to enlist some help painting it. Jorn gave Van de Loo’s maid Erika a small pot of black ink and instructed her exactly where to drop it onto the canvas from the second-story window. Although hesitant, she did as he asked. This “chance” gesture was another pastiche of Pollock’s drip method. It seems to have produced a large black splotch at the upper right, and likely other splatters across the canvas, several of which Jorn reinforced with more black layers in oil. He took a step back, in this lighthearted way, from individual expression.
Appropriately enough in the context of the Solomon R. Guggenheim collection, the painting is also a monument to Kandinsky, the painter for whom Jorn went to Paris hoping to study in 1936. Its structure of opposing forces surging forth and receding in a web of brightly colored layers parallels that of Kandinsky’s symphonic battle scenes of the 1910s. Jorn’s typical semi-figurative forms are present as usual, including the large fish-head shape in the center marked as a face with two small black eyes and a flat mouth. The imagery has been linked to the fish markets of Albisola, but the large arched form of the “head” also relates to major Kandinsky works he likely saw in Paris in the 1930s, such as *Mit dem schwarzen Bogen (With the Black Arch)* of 1912, which features a very similar composition.

At the same time, Jorn seems to be in dialogue with not only Pollock’s drip method, but also Abstract Expressionism in general in this unusually large picture, painted with evident speed as a well-balanced and grand scale picture/event. *A Soul for Sale* does not simply pay homage to modernism, colored by humorous semi-figurative elements. It is also a subtle critique of the overblown rhetoric of abstract painting in 1958. Its mimicry of a monumental Abstract Expressionism pushes toward pastiche, an extreme form of irony in which meaning threatens a constant slippage into its opposite, producing a simultaneous celebration and critique. A deliberately imitative mode of art-making, pastiche indicates a disjuncture between the original content of a form and its present manifestation. It also suggests a proliferation of meanings in which the original meaning, in this case emotional expression, does not disappear. The very suggestion of pastiche in the dramatically over-determined gestural language of abstract painting after the war causes the entire discourse of authenticity and transcendence to splinter and break down.

The title *A Soul for Sale* could have several referents: first of all the Situationist view of the subject under capitalism, ever-prepared to exchange whatever is available including the most sacrosanct and personal qualities; second, Jorn himself, never averse to self-irony. He frankly avowed that he made paintings in order to sell them, to support himself as well as the work of his artist friends, to whom he was notoriously generous. Jorn parodies the voice of the ad man in *A Soul for Sale*, deflating whatever rhetorical claims can be read into his gestures through the semantics of the title. His pastiche defies the conventional sociological function of art in bourgeois society to symbolize the transcendence of crass commercialism and everyday concerns. As Herbert Marcuse wrote in 1937, the idea of the “soul” is essential to the construction of art as the repository of the “unexpressed, unfulfilled life of the individual” in modern society. By epitomizing capitalist society’s ideals of a “higher, purer, nonprosaic world,” Marcuse argues, the concept of the soul effectively affirms and strengthens the structural separation of culture from commerce. It is this implicit role of cultural production that Jorn ridicules, by asserting that art, too, is commerce and therefore cannot be maintained as a pure site of rejection that renders itself powerless in its own autonomy. His use of titles that are often puns and references to literature, politics, and current sociology
separates his work from the bulk of Abstract Expressionism, with its rejection of titles. Jorn’s titles mediate the relationship of his works to their audiences, emphasizing the framing element, the metaphoric dimensions of the imagery, and thus the social and dialogical nature of the artwork.

Most pointedly, the title is a direct dig at the contemporary gestural painter, whether Abstract Expressionist or Informel. He explicitly critiqued the construction of the incommunicative, incorrigible, inevitably self-destructive Expressionist artist by the popular media. Jorn lamented the total self-destruction of artists like Pollock and the German painter Wols, who pushed their art to such an extreme emotional pitch that death seemed the inevitable result. He criticizes action painting as an insular formalist method, writing:

The success of so-called action painting is due to a pseudo-activity which claims to be based on “internal necessity,” but is in fact nothing more than a faithful recollection of external necessity. In other words the social facts of life are accepted in a thoroughly harmless and orthodox way. This attitude is a denial of art because art ought to contest these social factors.

Jorn also rejected the construction of the American Abstract Expressionist in criticism by Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. He lamented the spectacular (meaning both shallow and theatrical, in the Situationist sense) aspect of action painting. Jorn accused Greenberg of using the publicity language of media-friendly sports like boxing in his descriptions of the “strength” of various painters, and rejected Rosenberg’s formulation of “action painting” for its connection to “acting,” thus making action painting nothing more than show-business, like the demonstrations of a trapeze artist. While his description of Greenberg’s criticism was fairly accurate, he did not fully address Rosenberg’s understanding of the term “action,” which related it to a critique of self-expression and ideas of historical agency in line with the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. Jorn responded instead to the public perceptions prevalent at the time in Europe about Abstract Expressionism as an American movement surrounded by media hype, often seen as a threat to the culture of a struggling postwar Europe.

When Abstract Expressionism finally became accepted in the USA in the mid-1950s by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, it was a victory for a group of artists who had struggled for two decades in relative obscurity. But its promotion by these same institutions appeared in Europe as another form of cultural imperialism. Jorn’s familiarity with the New York School came from their heavy promotion in a series of exhibitions in Europe from 1957 to 1959 with the help of political organizations such as the United States Information Agency, a wing of the CIA, as emblems of America’s openness to all forms of creative expression. Although the role of the USIA was kept secret at the time, and in fact directly contradicted the intentions of the American artists (most of whom explicitly rejected nationalism in art), it was clear from the brouhaha surrounding these shows that both American and European political representatives supported the movement as an example of Western
freedom of expression. Yet with these moves of what the Situationists called “recuperation”—the redirecting of liberatory artistic intentions toward commercial and political goals—foreign audiences saw perhaps more clearly than those in the USA the way institutions of art, politics, and the mass media distorted the intentions of the artists. Perhaps unfairly, Jorn criticized the American painters themselves for their political conformity, a viewpoint only possible because of his own unawareness of either the early development of Abstract Expressionism or the ongoing political writing of artists like Barnett Newman. Only understanding the movement in the polemical context of postwar European reception, he viewed it as apolitical. Be that as it may, Jorn’s broader message has been borne out repeatedly since the 1960s: any attempt to contest the dominant culture, his leering faces proclaim, becomes nonsensical when art is merely a decoration on its functionaries’ walls. As the avant-garde ages, history returns as farce. Abstract Expressionism refused to address the politics of art, preferring the search for universal truths, and so it became an instrument of the Cold War. Jorn’s painting was a deliberate pastiche of what Europeans saw as a false consciousness in American painting.

The “Luxury Paintings”

Jorn produced his most significant pastiche of Pollock’s approach in the “Luxury Paintings” of 1961. These works both engage the drip technique as a method of production for luxury commodities and engage its social status as media spectacle, détourning the mark of Pollock into a Marxist statement on artistic value and expenditure. The series explicitly stages painting as a medium of superficiality, not just in the literal sense of a flat surface, but also in the social and economic implications of the term. To produce them, he used a particularly opaque and shiny synthetic lacquer paint, splattering it from the brush, pouring it in large swaths that wrinkle on the picture surface, and applying it with paint-dipped string (Fig. 5.4). The titles, appropriately playful and abstract, came from James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*.

In *Phornix Park*, looping lines in complementary colors present imprints of objects rather than gestures of the brush or body. Spattered enamel in vivid hues creates organic textures across the surface. Jorn describes the “Luxury” series as coming out of Impressionism as well as Tachisme, writing that he “didn’t want to make an optical impression, but materialize the picture directly from the flecks of color, without a model.” Lawrence Alloway, in his 1961 essay for the “Luxury Paintings” exhibition in London, specifies that the works “illuminate the irrational content of Pointillism,” as a “fantastic pattern imposed on nature, a wayward human projection rather than an intuition of objective laws.” The Pointillist patterns create a dynamic movement between image and process, figure and ground. They relate to Jorn’s multifaceted theoretical investigations at the time into quantum theory, topology, and the semiotics of Tachisme.
The paint drips reflect a range of earlier Surrealist methods, including Jorn’s own early experiments, that drew on Kandinsky’s theory of point, line, and plane. Jorn describes a historical lineage of what he calls “anti-abstraction” that supersedes the mere two-dimensional explorations of Kandinsky’s flat and bounded compositions. He writes:

I have never made any but anti-abstract paintings following the current of Hans Arp and Max Ernst, followed by Mondrian and Marcel Duchamp. Kandinsky, in Von Punkt über Linie zur Fläche, had aligned modern art according to the perspective of Euclidean geometry, whereas the innovators mentioned above moved towards an inverse geometry, aiming towards a polydimensional cosmos at the surface, just as at the line and the point. The technique of dripping painting showed the absurdity of Kandinsky’s attitude. If you work very close to the canvas, the flow of colors makes surfaces, blotches. But if you arrange things once again at a distance, the color is divided into little splashes, which only make points. This is exactly like elements in perspective. They start as masses and disappear over the horizon as points. Kandinsky started at the horizon, in the abstract to arrive where? Me, I started in the immediate present, to arrive where? The end point, for Jorn at least, was less interesting than the exploratory path itself. The “Luxury Pictures” present an experimental vocabulary of drips from different locations in space and time relative to the canvas. Close to the
canvas, they become poured shapes that continue to roll and morph as they dry; from further away, they spatter as spots and take on an appearance of temporal immediacy. Dipped along the length of string, they suggest linear paths through space cut across by a two-dimensional slice. The marks evoke four dimensions rather than two, and in the universe of Jornian mathematics possibly even more, if one chooses to consider the interpersonal, the cultural, and the political as further dimensions still.

The relationship of points and spirals directly evokes topology, the new mathematical field that preoccupied Jorn at the time, and led him to a unique interpretation of the meaning of the drip method. In the 1960 article “Open Creation and Its Enemies,” he suggests returning topology to its origins as Analysis Situs, mathematician Henri Poincaré’s original term for topology in the nineteenth century, and one that nicely links topology to the Situationist movement—at least “superficially.” In his account of the Möbius strip and the topological figures called “homeomorphs,” Jorn makes short work of Euclidean geometry, which had become inadequate precisely because it was only useful in defining the static structure of a world removed from the temporal and the social. He rejects Euclidean mathematics as an ideal system that does not take into account the point of view of the observer. Topology allows for the introduction of disorder and the temporal into geometric thought, analyzing the transformation of forms in multiple dimensions. In the end, though, as a mathematical discourse even topology was too static for Jorn. He proposes the invention of “a situlogy, a situgraphy and perhaps even a situmetry beyond existing topographical knowledge,” suggesting a new field of artistico–scientific research without specifying what it might mean.72 The special issues of Jacqueline de Jong’s Situationist Times that Jorn helped develop on the “labyrinth” and “rings and chains” were morphological investigations equivalent to topology’s mathematical research into the ways forms can change but still maintain a fundamental continuity with their prior manifestations.73 Typically, his topological theorizing was too opaque and idiosyncratic to contribute much to the discipline per se (and in fact he and de Jong were attempting to cut across the very notion of disciplinary specialization by opening up these questions in the first place), but it became another point of connection with broader cultural investigations at the time. If the linear networks in the “Luxury Pictures” evoke mathematical or atomic models, then, so much the better.

The concreteness of three-dimensional reality, meanwhile, is the material “remainder” of Jorn’s experiment, and the physical medium of these pictures has its own distinct social implications. “Lacquer” is a general term indicating a variety of different paints used traditionally for luxury goods in Asia (originally an organic substance produced by trees, but now made commercially). Synthetic lacquer is commonly used today for industrial purposes, such as furniture and appliance painting. Jorn’s use of it rather than oil paint was deliberate, and likely inspired by Pollock’s own unorthodox use of materials, including lacquer, for their ability to pour. The substance recalls
both the luxury object of “high-end” decorative arts, evoking art’s economic status as a valuable object, and at the same time the “lower” production of industrial paint, such as commercial paints and industrial enamels. It emphasizes an object-like literalness while at the same time pointing to the sliding scale of value. Lacquer oscillates between the two artificial poles of high and low, modifiers that are assigned to objects very subjectively.

While Pollock himself did not acknowledge the significance of mass culture which his choice of materials could be understood to reflect, Jorn was deliberately inviting a comparison with the non-artistic, or kitsch. He made apparent the social meaning of this material, as immediately evident from the title of the series, “Luxury Paintings.” This was a pastiche of the mercurial economy of the art market, related to Jorn’s views on the social relevance of art as a luxury or surplus. In his Situationist study of Marxist economics, Critique de la politque economique (the title taken directly from the subtitle of Marx’s Capital), he argues that Marx’s conception of value as based entirely on labor and “use” is inadequate. He considers value as something constantly changing rather than a fixed quantity set during the production of an object and based on its future use, as Marx described in Capital. Value, for Jorn, is created entirely through subjective interest. While classic Marxism aimed ultimately to eliminate all surplus value in the form of capital because of its role in social exploitation, he argues that the concept of surplus could not and should not be eliminated, because its importance relates not only to economics, but society and biology as well. The concept of surplus or luxury is central to Jorn’s definition of art, as a source of “counter-value” that negates all conventional concepts of practical value. He writes, “Art is the invitation to an expenditure of energy, without a specific purpose aside from that brought to it by the spectator himself. It is prodigality.”

Jorn states in his aesthetic treatise Held og hasard that, “conception, superfluity, prodigality, munificence, surplus, the voluptuous, luxury, the generous—is identical with the aesthetic principle.” More than just a fairly obvious pastiche of the art market, then, the “Luxury” title was a commentary on art’s social function as an index of the very instability of social values, something conventionally useless and therefore crucial to society.

His account is reminiscent of philosopher Georges Bataille’s concept of “expenditure.” Rather than citing Bataille’s theory of expenditure directly, however, Jorn seems to have arrived at his insights through mutual sources, such as Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud. A quote from Rimbaud’s “Saison en enfer” forms the epigraph in the catalog for the London exhibition of the “Luxury Pictures”:

Et le printemps m’a apporté l’affreux rire de l’idiot,
-- oh! tous les vices, colère, luxure,
-- magnifique, la luxure;
-- surtout mensoge et paresse.

And Spring brought me the frightening laugh of the idiot;
-- oh! all the vices, anger, lust,
-- magnificent, lust;
-- above all, lying and laziness.77

The poem underscores Jorn’s ideas of superficiality and inauthenticity, with
the added dimension of prodigality and luxury as lust—a dimension absent
in the purely abstract visual play of the paintings, except perhaps for the
implications of splattering paint as sexual emission (which are downplayed
by the vibrant colors). He playfully subverts the hedonistic connotations of
moral and sexual transgression into a broader critique of capitalism and the
social value of art.

Unlike Pollock’s drips, with their grand and graceful gestures, Jorn’s string
lines in the “Luxury Paintings” could be described as limp, irregular, and
awkward. In some paintings like Phornix Park, the string loops create spiral
shapes, deliberately referencing an ancient symbol associated with both
untrained creativity and the history of the avant-garde. He was fascinated by
the spiral’s persistence through centuries of human history, as he documents
in the book Guldhørn og Lykkehjul. It also directly recalls the “Père Ubu”
character of Alfred Jarry, the turn-of-the-century avant-garde poet. Jorn
was in the early 1960s a member of the satirical Collège de Pataphysique,
the French organization devoted to the “science of imaginary solutions” in
the tradition of Jarry.78 The same year he exhibited the “Luxury Paintings” in
London, the Collège gave Jorn the honorary title “Commandeur de l’Ordre
de la Grande Gidouille,” “gidouille” being the spiral on Ubu’s belly. Where
Jarry’s Ubu character epitomizes the ridiculousness and failure of grandiose
ideals, Jorn’s reference to the spiral also brings in a more modest dimension
of human endeavor.

Ib Hansen took a series of photos of Jorn making the “Luxury Paintings”
in Paris (Fig. 5.5).79 His photos display a contemplative Jorn squatting on
the ground above a canvas roughly his size, holding a piece of paint-dipped
string in careful consideration of where to place the next mark. The image on
the canvas, a work called Shaun the Ondt, suggests a portrait, though with its
implications of energetic dispersion—forms both “pulverized” and “seeding”
new shapes as Alloway writes—this portrait presents human presence as
something vivid but ephemeral and, literally, scattered. The photograph
provides a very different vision of the artist than the famous photographs of
Pollock drip painting taken by Hans Namuth in 1951. Instead of the dancelike
concentration and aggressive energy of Pollock stepping into his mural-scale
picture, Jorn crouches alongside his in contemplation. The vibrant colors and
use of string suggest a lighthearted experiment with seemingly meaningless
doodles rather than a grand public statement. In the works done without
string, the even scattering of lacquer splatters across the surface gives them
an empty, automated, almost unthinking quality. Jorn’s measured application
of dripped paint highlights the fact that by this point, Pollock’s technique
was so well known that it had become clichéd. It was now available for an
impersonal “serial production,” through its proliferation as a technique used
by innumerable other artists.
Jorn’s “Luxury Paintings” were recognized as pastiche but dismissed by critics at the time for their lack of originality.60 While it was perceptive, the critique did not recognize the deliberateness of his statement on the way value is constructed socially, originality being one of the most important signifiers of modernist value. Jorn’s process suggests that there is no such thing as an original gesture, an innocent or unprecedented mark, but that in modernist abstraction, ordinary marks become commodified into the style of a “great” artist the more they are publicized as a personal innovation. His drip or string splatter still manifests its own singularity as a trace of an action, but a modest and unoriginal one. It acknowledges the existence of precedents that define in advance both the meaning and the value of that action. The “Luxury Paintings” combine Jorn’s techniques of parody,
pastiche, and materialism in a manner that cannot be fully dismissed as a marketing ploy.

Jorn’s strategies of painterly materialism, parody, metaphor, and pastiche directly critique the increasingly apolitical rhetoric of transcendence in art of the 1950s. The virtuosic or aggressive gestures of Abstract Expressionism and Informel index a heroic and alienated subjectivity. His paintings manifest the painterly gesture as, following Nancy’s terminology, the singular utterance of a subjectivity linked to a community, rather than a pure individual presence. What makes Jorn’s view so relevant—and so contemporary—is his assumption that painting is no longer a sacred space that symbolizes the free reign of the artist’s imagination, but rather an everyday object that stirs the observer’s imagination as well as critical reflection by means of a sensory address. What matters is art’s dynamic effect on the viewer, where the artist’s role is that of an initiator rather than an expresser of inner feelings.

Notes

12. Ibid.


33. Ibid., 250.

34. Ibid., 259.


43. Ibid., 123–25.


50. *Ny international kunst* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Museum, 1959); and *Asger Jorns samlinger* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1982).


59. Story recounted to the author by Otto Van de Loo, December 6, 2012, at his home in Munich.


72. Ibid., 32.


75. Jorn, The Natural Order and Other Texts, 264.


79. Some of these were published in Henry Voersaa, “Han er en eksplosion,” Billedbladet, September 1961, 32–35.


In the mid- to late-1960s, he produced some of his most lyrical large-scale paintings on canvas such as *Im Anfang war das Bild* (In the Beginning was the Image, Fig. 6.1), a landmark 1965 work whose title relates explicitly to Jorn’s belief that in Nordic artistic tradition interpretation was always subjective and multiple, postdating the creation of the image rather than the other way around. A humanoid form struggles to emerge in an almost phallic thrust out of the center of the painting, surrounded by a whole host of other grotesque faces and what appear to be areas of day-glo primordial sludge. Perhaps it represents Jorn’s dual interests in the animal nature of humanity and the social nature of subjectivity. The painting declares in no uncertain terms his belief in the power of the image in contemporary society as well as the dialogic nature of his practice, which insists on a connection between his artwork and the theoretical, philosophical, and anthropological interests of his day.

In this period, Jorn also maintained his interest in architectural decoration and abstract history painting. He painted large-scale lyrical abstractions in art dealer Børge Birch’s summer house in Læsø in 1965. Then in 1968, Jorn traveled to Cuba with Wifredo Lam and painted a large-scale abstract mural in a socialized bank relating to the revolutionary battles in the Cuban countryside ten years earlier. He continued to finance Situationist and post-Situationist activities including the production of films by Debord and Danish artist Albert Mertz. Moving to a house in Colombes on the outskirts of Paris, he watched the student and worker uprising of May ’68 from a distance, contributing only a series of lithographic posters with slogans such as “Pas de puissance d’imagination sans images puissantes” (Imagination is powerless without powerful images).

He spent a significant amount of time and energy, however, working on a relatively unknown but highly innovative series of archaeological projects. Searching for a new approach to collectivity after the demoralizing conflicts of the SI, he founded the mischievously named Skandinavisk Institut for...
Sammenlignende Vandalisme (Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism, or SICV), devoted to the study of Nordic artistic traditions, in 1961. The organization consisted of Jorn and a few primary collaborators who worked on a set of photographic documents of prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavian art around Europe.

Many of the more than 25,000 photographs produced over the course of the decade were published in a series of visually stunning SICV volumes that are as much artist’s books as archaeological texts (Fig. 6.2), although only two proper SICV books were published during the existence of the Institute from 1961 to 1965, when Jorn declared the project’s failure and moved on.²

From 1965 to 1973, Jorn continually augmented the collections in Silkeborg and attempted to convince the city to commission renowned Danish architect Jørn Utzon to design a new museum building. Unfortunately, Utzon’s innovative designs were rejected by the Silkeborg city council as too outlandish and impractical. He also worked with British art historian Guy Atkins and Danish historian Troels Andersen in compiling the first volumes of his catalogue raisonné. Jorn traveled to New York for the first time in 1970 for an exhibition at the Lefebre Gallery, following the visit with a world tour including Japan, where his daughter Susanne was studying. At the Lefebre opening, he met his last wife, Nanna Enzensburger. In 1971 she gave birth to their son Ib. In 1972, he executed sculptures in Milan from bronze and Carrara marble, again experimenting with unfamiliar, if ancient, materials. By this time,
he was already suffering from renewed lung problems. At age 59, Jorn died of lung cancer in Århus on May 1, 1973.

Asger Jorn’s career spans artistic practices generally considered opposed in art history: the high modernist gestural abstraction of 1950s painting; the use of photography in artists’ books as a critique of modern art history; the political activism and anti-art antics of the avant-garde since Dada; and the exploration of craft materials and public decoration particularly relevant in postwar European art as each country reexamined its own indigenous traditions in an era of reconstruction. While Jorn has been classified as an “expressionist” painter by default, this account aims to problematize that simplistic designation with a more nuanced discussion of what such a label means and the ways Jorn’s work goes against or beyond it. Jorn redefined personal expression from the old model of his artistic mentor Kandinsky, as an “inner necessity” each artist must externalize on his own, to a more explicitly social conception. While expression may be a fundamental human need, it only develops through specific cultural languages and in dialogue with others. Jorn also explicitly critiqued throughout his career the recuperation of expression by elite institutions of art and politics, attempting to underscore and celebrate the types of marginalized, anonymous, popular creativity that mainstream history has overlooked. Jorn’s Modifications and book projects in particular developed new approaches to art-making that attempted to break down the very dichotomy of avant-garde and kitsch by developing a new kind of art that directly challenged the institution of “high” art.
art through both aesthetic form and networks of distribution. These projects reject any totalizing view of culture and problematize the methodological assumptions of objectivity in art history and archaeology. Even in abstract painting, Jorn’s constant emphasis on the social frame of the artwork through titles, exhibition tactics, and textual interventions insisted on the artwork’s contiguity with social life. Jorn developed a very contemporary recognition of art as a social intermediary through a dialogue played out both within his work and through theoretical and textual devices of framing extrinsic to the work which nevertheless help shape its meaning.

Jorn’s work spans highly material approaches to painting, drawing, prints, ceramics, and tapestry, and the theoretical sophistication of his deliberately playful writing. It suggests an alternative postwar model of the relation of painting to politics and society in its opposition to both the Greenbergian formalism of modernist painting divorced from its social context and the Situationist extreme of rejecting art completely. His contribution reframes the history of art in the 1950s as a much more complex and international series of interventions than the picture currently presented. It takes account of alternative and outmoded traditions that continue to shape artistic discourse in the present, despite their marginalization. It suggests a more emancipatory approach to creativity than the high modernist cliché of the artist-as-isolated-genius. Art-making, Jorn tells us, does not have to mean something spectacularly removed from everyday life. Art can mean, simply, a more meaningful experience of living.

Active dialogue with Jorn profoundly shaped the work of Dotremont, Constant, Dubuffet, and many other artists with whom he collaborated. His influence on the younger artists he knew was tremendous, particularly on the SPUR artists, Pierre Alechinsky, and Jacqueline de Jong. Jorn’s work also inspired a wide range of later artists like Danish painter Per Kirkeby and German artist Albert Oehlen, to name two who have singled out his importance directly. The legacy of his work lives on in contemporary investigations of painting as a medium of provocation, ironic expression, and humor. The Modifications inspired or anticipated later series of paintings on old reproductions or canvases by Arnulf Rainer and Per Kirkeby in the 1960s, and more recently by Jim Shaw, Albert Oehlen, Jonathan Meese, Werner Büttner, Manuel Ocampo, Dr. Lakra, Shay Kun, and others whose debt to Jorn and the SI remains mostly unacknowledged. His simultaneous investigation of the language of painting as a hybrid medium of abstract materiality, on the one hand, and imaginative signification, on the other, appears almost ubiquitous in early twenty-first century painting. His artist’s books and anthropological investigations have yet to be fully rediscovered, but it is only a matter of time before they, too, along with his most accomplished paintings, are incorporated into the larger story of twentieth-century art. His paintings exist there with difficulty, considering their inherent challenges to the authoritative process of art-historical canonization; the works directly challenge the objectivity of aesthetic judgment, and serve as a reminder that history itself begins as a subjective point of view.
Notes

1. The murals are discussed in Andersen, Jorn i Havana, trans. Peter Shield (Rødovre, Denmark: Sohn, 2005).


4. See the documentary on Jorn by Per Kirkeby, Asger Jorn (Copenhagen: Statens Filmcentral, Kraka Film, 1977); as well as the discussion in Rudi Fuchs, Johannes Gachnang, and Per Kirkeby, Uit het Noorden: Edvard Munch, Asger Jorn, Per Kirkeby (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1984); and Teresa Østergaard Pedersen, Hvad skovsøen gemte. On Oehlen, see Rod Mengham, “Storm Damage,” in I Will Always Champion Good Painting / I Will Always Champion Bad Painting (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), 60; and Friedrich Petzel, “Psycho-sludge,” in Oehlen Williams 95, ed. Catherine Gudis (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1995), 138–51.

5. See, for example, the catalogue David Wallis, Hybrids: International Contemporary Painting (London: Tate, 2001).
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