Ironic Gestures: Asger Jorn, Abstract Expressionism, and Informel

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In 1958, Danish artist Asger Jorn painted *A Hint of Weakness or Effortlessly Slow* (Schwächeanflug or Langsam Mühe) (figure 26). In it, Jorn develops a series of semifigural forms through the use of fairly uniform, even monotonous black brushstrokes evoking awkward doodles. He replaces the quintessentially fast and, at least in artists like Georges Mathieu or Franz Kline, bold or graceful gestures of Informel and Abstract Expressionism with slow and seemingly dumb strokes. Arguably as self-defeating as a gestural stroke by Willem de Kooning, who typically painted, wiped away, and re-painted his images in a long and tedious process, Jorn’s application is nevertheless much more diminutive in width and length—more akin to drawing—and more apt to turn in on itself than the broad gestures of de Kooning. Black doodles here and there resolve themselves into masklike faces, childlike birds, and other possible designs, such as trees, knots, molecules, or insects.

Although the composition consists of carefully arranged colored areas distributed across a lighter background, it is distinctly unbalanced through the heavy emphasis of blue, yellow, and dull green colors at upper and lower right. The colored forms seem to circulate aimlessly around the picture, an effect created by the broad brushstrokes and black outlines along the edges of the picture. The tonal values of the foreground and background elements reverse themselves on the left and right halves of the work, with white framing the shapes at left and receding to a small central area at right. This reversal disrupts any illusionism of figure over ground, such as the conceptual implications of space revived in Informel works that isolate a gestural brushstroke on a color field, for example in the work of Mathieu. Furthest from Jorn’s strategies of irony, artifice, and materialism was the painting of Mathieu, which abstracts the painterly sign to the

point that it refers to nothing but the artist’s performance and makes the event of art making itself into a transcendent category.1 Whereas Jorn’s experimentation deliberately avoided a signature style, the total abstraction of Mathieu’s painting deliberately masks its visual sources in, for example, Japanese and Arabic calligraphy, and comes to refer exclusively to the artist’s dramatic persona. Notorious for his theatrical painting performances, Mathieu executed these works as a virtuoso, creating decorative and aggressive calligraphic shapes utterly removed from everyday life. In contrast to Mathieu’s graceful and composed brushstrokes, Jorn emphasizes the dull, anti-virtuosic slowness of the brushstrokes through awkward gestures that scribble
over themselves or clumsily turn in at their ends. The title summarizes the distinct impression of methodical awkwardness created by these qualities. Instead of the heroic artistic gesture, Jorn provides a "hint of weakness," a title that is both a joke on Informel and an affirmation of his preference for a kind of average, everyday creativity. The humor is characteristic of Jorn. His critique of gestural painting, expressed in both writing and art making, directly targeted the assumptions of virtuosity, genius, and authenticity evident in what he viewed as the dominant paradigm of abstract painting in the 1950s.

The work of Asger Jorn, prolific artist, theorist, and organizer of key postwar movements including Cobra and the Situationist International, has been infrequently shown and seldom understood in the United States, where abstract expressionism dominates our understanding of postwar painting. Yet as a recent surge of interest for Jorn’s work in Europe demonstrates, the time is ripe for a reevaluation of his project in relation to the international tendencies of Abstract Expressionism and European Informel, Tachism, and lyrical abstraction. Asger Jorn’s painting has been consistently mischaracterized as "expressionist," annexed as a latecomer to the early twentieth-century movement marked by its emphasis on inner emotions externalized in the work of art, as Kandinsky summarized in his conception of "inner necessity." Jorn and his colleagues, however, did not consider themselves expressionists and explicitly separated themselves from the earlier movement. More significantly, Jorn’s work of the late 1950s demonstrates an explicit irony in relation to the painterly gesture. This irony separates his work not only from the early-twentieth-century conception that the gestural artwork represents an outward manifestation of inner feelings, but also from the contemporary understanding of expression in Abstract Expressionism and Informel. These broadly defined “movements" tended to consider the gesture as a process of capturing on canvas the artist’s authentic struggle with his (and very occasionally her) environment. Jorn’s work presents an alternative paradigm. Utilizing a vocabulary somewhere between doodling and graffiti, Jorn’s paintings embody affirmative gestures of the everyday creative subject. They attempt to represent a singular voice from everyday culture rather than high culture, in both critique and homage to innovators of the new painting such as Jackson Pollock.

**EXPRESSION AND COMMUNITY**

Jorn’s gestural painting revolves around the singular presence of the artist but conceives the artist as a social being. He understood the subject as developing collectively, linked to a particu-
lar cultural context and constantly shaped by the social and natural environment. Jorn defined art as an expression of intention, or as he put it, “intention and art are the same thing.” Yet he also asserted that this intentionality always related to community and its expressions were inseparable from the community’s interpretation of them. He wrote: “There is no distinction between impression and expression where there is a work of art. Nor is there between the conscious or unconscious intentions of the artist and the realization of the expression in a material. Neither is there between the expression of the artist and the impression of the public... The artist is... the actual agent of de-leveling, of movement and disequilibrium, in the community.”

Jorn’s painterly gestures, illuminated by his theoretical writings, embody this conception of the subject as existing only in relation to community. I call these “singular” as opposed to “individual” gestures, borrowing Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical distinction between the “singular voice” and the individual subject. 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 identifies subjectivity as something constantly creating itself in relation to others. For Jorn, the self is no longer an internal subject opposed to external reality, but a singular intentional entity in constant dialogue or, frequently, conflict with other singularities, which shape its very being. Jorn’s gesture expresses the singular, the voice of enunciation in a specific context, rather than the individual or “whole” preexisting and private subject. He considered the psyche as inherently socially constructed, based on a constantly shifting desire or intention shaped through interaction with other subjects. Jorn never subscribed to the social alienation internalized by many painters in both Europe and America.

Informel, and the limited examples of Abstract Expressionism available to Jorn, exemplified a less critical approach, a gestural painting of the individual rather than the singular gesture. These gestures referred to a subject presented fully formed in its bodily traces, and the artist as essentially different from the everyday subject because the artistic gesture marked a special talent. By the 1950s Jorn rejected the term “gesture” precisely because of what he described as the term’s link to an increasingly inflated “rhetoric.” Avoiding a signature style, Jorn developed a uniquely critical approach that foregrounded the presentness of painting as an action without slipping into the rhetoric of heroic and/or mystical transcendence characteristic of writers like Michel Tapié or Barnett Newman.

For the first generation of Abstract Expressionism, artists who developed their mature styles in the late 1940s, the gesture related to the originality of, as Irving Sandler described, a “unique artistic temperament.” William Seitz similarly emphasized the “timelessness” of the “authentic” expression. The American movement monumentalized what Robert Motherwell called “truth
to experience” in large-scale visions of personal and alienated subjectivity. But Jorn was primarily exposed to these ideas through European writers. While he was working with the Cobra group in Paris, Jorn encountered the movement defined as “informel” and “art autre” by Tapié, “tachism” by Charles Estienne, and “lyrical abstraction” by Mathieu. The new approaches to painting became the subject of heated polemics among French artists and critics, through exhibitions like the trans-national “Véhémences confrontées” organized by Mathieu and Tapié in 1951. Tapié insisted on the importance of “authentic artists” of “exceptional individuality.” He wrote specifically of the “violence of the gesture” and the elaboration of “signs charged with a maximum possible of expressivity.” He thus described the artwork as a trace of his 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 also actively revived German Expressionism’s outdated conception of the subject as embodying a superhuman will to expression.

Tapié’s rival, Charles Estienne, wrote likewise that art was about the “expression of the authentic.” Estienne identified the most important characteristic of Cobra art to be its “imperious and virile line, clear and strong like a sword.” He described the gestures of Hans Hartung, a lyric-abstract painter Estienne favored, as “the most naked and natural gesture through which a man would escape the anguish of his condition.” The writings of Tapié, Estienne, Mathieu, Jean Paulhan, Pierre Restany, Jean-Paul Sartre, and André Malraux all participate in this rhetoric of heightened authenticity and heroic virility manifested in the gesture. For Malraux, one of the most popular critics, the primary function of modern art was the subjective expression of the artist’s psyche. He presented a history of art driven entirely by a series of geniuses, whose educated eye separated them from ordinary individuals. Malraux described how these isolated men sought “transcendental” forms to express emotions. For these French critics—as well as for Americans like Barnett Newman who wrote of the sublime unbeknownst to Jorn—individual painterly expression led directly to transcendence.

Jorn, in fact, acknowledged the formal relationship of his work to Tachism and Informel, with their investigations of the importance of process and the dissolution of pictorial composition and representational form. His concerns with expressing a subject in the process of formation did, in fact, participate in a new understanding of painting in this period that differed radically from classic expressionism. Rather than the expression of internal psychic forces or emotions, the most significant painting of the 1950s emphasized the gesture as a record of a provisional and shifting subjectivity firmly grounded in a physical body. But when Informel came to mean only purely abstract art and an academic and overtly mystical discourse, Jorn rejected the term “informel.” In a 1954 text, Jorn accused Tapié of creating a new academicism of
Informel abstraction. Jorn would also attack the institution of art criticism as a co-founder of the explicitly leftist Situationist International. In April 1958, the SI staged an action in Belgium against the International Assembly of Art Critics. They distributed a venomous tract which accused the critics of “striving to transform their activities into institutions” as well as soliciting “official recognition from the completely outmoded but still materially dominant society, for which most of them have been loyal watchdogs.”

Jorn’s artistic critique of Informel would develop in this collective context of such disruptive actions.

Jorn criticized the mystification of the artist’s role as something that transcends everyday life in Informel criticism. In his writings, he rejected Malraux’s language of the “sacred” and the “divine” because they induced passivity by presenting idealized models of the artist. Jorn claimed to develop an “anti-abstract” art and an “abstract art that does not believe in abstraction,” indicating his opposition both to abstraction as an art institution and to the mystical descriptions of it as a new belief system. The discourse of abstract art as a paradigm of liberation had come to refer only to the artist’s freedom. Jorn critiqued Sartre’s conception of painting as an “Act” as well as Harold Rosenberg’s Sartrean designation “action painting” for their implication of the artist creating a spectacle for a passive viewer. Jorn argued that action painting makes painting into show business, like a circus act. His painting methods rejected the Informel emphasis on the spectacularization of the artist’s psyche by focusing on formal qualities of artefact, on the operations of the hand in its most crude and vulgar physicality, and to techniques of humor as an effective opposition to transcendence and sublimation. Jorn developed gestures that were playful, personal, inauthentic, and socially critical. Like everyday gestures, they insisted on their continuity with the realm of social action. In what follows, I will survey three discernible visual strategies in Jorn’s painting, methods that overlapped in his practice and at times appeared in the same work. They include the overpowering of the gesture in materiality, the gesture as direct parody in the form of caricature or vandalism, and the ironic pastiche of the abstract expressionist gesture.

**MATERIALITY SUBSUMES THE GESTURE**

Works like the 1956 painting *La grande victoire (The great victory)* exemplify Jorn’s combination of extreme materiality, at times verging on abjection, with caricature. It is tempting to read the title as a direct parody of Mathieu’s famous Battle images. In such incomplete figurations Jorn makes the mass-produced oil paint embody its own artificiality through its vulgar
colors and its elaboration of a wide range of textural values, from liquidity to scumbliness, opacity to transparency. These material paint qualities consistently overpower his gestures, which are themselves alternately hesitant, short, or scumbled. The colors deteriorate into brown and black mudliness by mixing on the surface of the canvas, overlapping and dripping down over each other. Some of the mid-1950s works acquire a textural thickness comparable to Dubuffet’s earlier haute pâtes. In La grande victoire, comic faces seem caught in a metamorphic process, developing out of paint pressed and pushed around the surface as if finger-painted. These semi-figurative masks are frequently described in mystical terms as “mythic beings” that differentiate Jorn’s post-Cobra painting from the total abstraction common in the New York School. But these images are emphatically resistant to completion and therefore symbolism, and yet they prevent Jorn’s gestures from referring only to the physical traces of his presence. His gestures also attempt to work out a subject matter and thus some form of social meaning, but one depicted as always forming itself and never fully pictured.

In the mid-1950s Jorn produced a series of works that evoked a material reality more directly somatic or “base” than the literality of paint itself. The large figure that seems to push against the painting’s edge in an untitled work of 1956 (figure 27) perhaps best exemplifies this abject materialism. The personage is bounded only by the outward seepage of dirt-colored oil paint. The monster is deliberately ugly and formless, dripped and stained in earth-toned washes evoking internal fluids and decomposition. The wash texture also recalls Jorn’s experiments with glazed ceramics at the time. Splattered gobs of paint compound the figure’s visceral quality, in what amounts to an attack on painting’s traditional function of mirroring a coherent subject. The spattering refers directly to Jackson Pollock: Jorn had experimented with Pollock’s drip method as early as 1953. The image exudes both comedy and a subtle horror at the dissolution of the figure before our eyes. Its vertical orientation, combined with the insistently horizontal seepage of the wash of paint that forms its body, is reminiscent of Jean Dubuffet’s Corps des Dames series. Dubuffet’s matièriste paintings were surely a point of departure for this image, since it is so close in color, tone, and caricature to the French painter’s series. Like the Corps des Dames, it inserts a vertical swath of raw matter in place of painting’s traditional window, blocking any recession into perspectival space with a vertical wall of relatively unstructured matter that rejects the implications of control by our gaze. The seepage and splattering of the pigment insistently points to the horizontality of the literal ground (or table) on which it was created. The seemingly decorative green and yellow drips that form the background contribute to this effect of matter flattened on the vertical surface of vision. Jorn’s foregrounding of matter and horizontality implies not an ideal observer but a material body interacting with literal space.
Like Dubuffet’s strategies, it forms an alternative to Pollock’s drip method as an attack on the idealized, individual human subject. Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois have argued that Pollock’s drip painting similarly embodies a critique of bourgeois individualism with its pretense...
to subjective unity, although as I will describe, Jorn considered Pollock’s process from the point of view of its popularity as a media spectacle. As with Pollock and Dubuffet, though, Jorn’s monstrous figure re-embodies the observer and insists on our physical presence. Jorn’s strategy of subsuming the gesture as well as the represented figure in materiality and the literalness of paint replaces the modernist painting as icon of individualism with the work as a record of a singular artistic process that acts against the bounded conception of the individual subject.

**Parody Diminishes the Gesture**

Although in many ways abject, Jorn’s conflation of vertical and horizontal axes in the 1956 work never reaches the anomic extreme of the Bataillean informe because of its figurative outlines. The only actual brushstrokes in the painting take the form of indeterminate marks evoking caricature: a large face, not clear enough to be apparent immediately nor to constitute an actual cartoon, but nevertheless both monstrous and funny. The face consists of heavy black eyebrow stains, beady disjointed eyes, awkward green-black lines indicating nose and mouth, and a lower section that could be considered a beard. The outline of a large U-shaped tongue sticking out of the mouth gives the figure a juvenile, rebellious quality. This facial gesture of rejection seems to be aimed at the observer’s very assumptions about pictorial meaning, playfully asserting the relevance of the image on its own material terms, divorced from the viewer’s preconceptions. These two extremes, of horror at the body’s dissolution and comedy at the appearance of a grotesque face out of sheer matter, are juxtaposed in an image which deliberately inspires directly conflicting interpretations. In such a work, Jorn’s brushstrokes directly parody the endowment of the gesture with transcendent meanings in the mainstream accounts of abstract painting in the 1950s. As we have seen in *A Hint of Weakness*, Jorn uses parody to diminish the gesture, maintaining its status as expression of singular intent but destroying its association with a heroic subjectivity.

In these parodic works, Jorn masquerades not as a genius, but as a charlatan, and sometimes even as a vandal. In the 1960 Modification called *The Top of the World* (plate 16), his gestural additions form a couple of battling monsters on top of the anonymously painted landscape. Jorn’s abstract add-ons are gestures not of profound and meaningful expression but, rather, playful sabotage. In this series, the graffitilike scrawls on the kitschy flea-market paintings reject their sentimentality by adding a level of humor, but at the same time preserve the legibility of the old scenes and thus subtly augment their status as earlier artistic creations. Jorn professed
that he wanted to update these old paintings for the modern world.\textsuperscript{50} He has also respectfully added his signature next to that of the original artist, in a pointed critique of both individual creation and connoisseurship.\textsuperscript{51}

The goal of the Modifications was ultimately not parody, but rather a more complex statement about the contemporaneity of both amateur and modern painting, even an argument for their very equivalence. Parody is more accurately a method Jorn utilizes in these works, appearing specifically in the gestures of Jorn's additions. They transgress the “artistic” space of spatial representation established by the original painters with radically simplified painterly marks. This kind of graffiti, however, was not merely an effacement. Jorn wrote that graffiti was a form of expression that asserted a common human “need,” sometimes expressed as vandalism.\textsuperscript{52} He also described graffiti as an art form that by defacing institutional structures defies the institutionalization of art and its removal from common society.\textsuperscript{53} Without negating the basic function of the gesture as self-expression, then, the “ Modifications” in their rebellious literalness parody the pretentiousness not of painting per se, but specifically of painting as an institution. Jorn's vandalism of artistic reproductions directly recalls Marcel Duchamp's 1919 addition of a moustache and goatee to the Mona Lisa, with the equally vulgar title, \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.} Yet where Duchamp's Dada gesture was part of his overt rejection of painting, Jorn's Modifications stand as records of a subjective encounter with a past work that through gesture parodies Painting with a capital \textit{P} but remains sympathetic to the anonymous creativity of the amateur painter. As early as 1941, Jorn praised such kitsch paintings as the “best art today.”\textsuperscript{54} He had also attempted such modifications earlier, in 1949, indicating that the project predated by ten years the Situationist rejection of art.\textsuperscript{55} But while in those works Jorn scribbled in ink on photoreproductions of famous artworks, such as a print of Raphael's angels,\textsuperscript{56} in the later Modifications he makes the Sunday painter an anonymous collaborator. Jorn's graffiti reconfigured the artistic gesture into something untutored, critical, and popular. He transformed the gesture from a sign of originality into an unauthorized response to a preexisting image. The 1959 Modifications were at the same time an example of Situationist \textit{détournement}, the “introduction of existing . . . artistic productions into a superior construction of milieu.”\textsuperscript{57} The SI described \textit{détournement} as a “parodic-serious” operation.\textsuperscript{58} This strategy, then, must in part be seen as a Situationist move and not unique to Jorn’s individual work—even though Jorn would emphasize the expressive potential of parody as opposed to Guy Debord's view that the sole possibility of expression was through parody.
PASTICHE: IRONIC GESTURES

Jorn's critique of the gesture also took the more elusive form of pastiche. A deliberately imitative mode of art making, pastiche has been interpreted as more and less critical in different periods, but in Jorn's case was an explicitly ironic and critical form. Jorn's explicit emphasis on irony set his understanding of artistic expression apart from contemporaneous painters in both Europe and America. Jorn wrote about the importance of irony, asserting that no form can express a specific content all the time, because in art just as in speech the same form can mean both the stated content and, by use of irony, the opposite. He repeatedly stressed the basic link between art and artificiality or artifice, including the possibility of inauthenticity or even deliberate lying on the artist's part. Jorn regarded lying as more important than any concept of truth, because he considered truth irreducibly subjective, while lies were purposeful play or critique. For Jorn artistic expressions embodied a social critique through their inauthenticity. He directly criticized American theorists of aesthetics for overemphasizing the importance of depth and truth. He reproached the philosophers Suzanne Langer, C. K. Ogden, I. A. Richards, and John Hospers for their "fear of the superficial and the hollow," and for "taking things too seriously." For Jorn, art was about the "superficial [overfladiske]," and an encounter with the unknown in which neither lie nor truth existed. Jorn systematically dispensed with the traditional notion that art had anything to do with truth.

The prioritization of irony and inauthenticity set Jorn fundamentally apart from both Abstract Expressionist and Informel discourse. Pastiche becomes evident in Jorn paintings where what initially seems like gestural brushwork proves to be a critique of the Abstract Expressionist or Informel paradigm, due in part to an ironic title or other framing device. Jorn specifically critiqued the institutionalization of Jackson Pollock's style through pastiche, although in many ways he admired Pollock's formal innovations. The American artist was by the late 1950s the most famous contemporary painter and a highly politicized figure in Europe, where after an initial period when critics attempted to portray the American artists as under-cultured Europeans, Pollock's fame expanded to the point that he came to stand for the ruggedness of American culture and the force of American political power in the Marshall Plan/Cold War era. For Jorn, he symbolized the institutionalization and Americanizing of the gestural techniques Jorn helped develop in Cobra. From Jorn's point of view, publicity turned an interestingly experimental painter back into a superior actor exemplifying the very discourse of individuality that the forms of Pollock's drip painting tended to negate.

Jorn probably saw his first large-scale Pollock painting in 1955, at the Museum of Modern
Art-sponsored exhibition 50 Ans d’art aux États-Unis in Paris. The show included Pollock’s Number 1A, 1948. In 1959 Jorn may have seen examples of Pollock’s aluminum and Duco drip painting at the Pollock retrospective in Paris or the MoMA-sponsored New American Painting exhibition. Jorn became aware of the drip method in the early 1950s, however, when he acquired a copy of the catalog of Pollock’s 1951 exhibition of ink drawings at Betty Parsons Gallery. Jorn reproduced one of these images in his 1958 book Pour la forme. This Pollock ink drawing relates directly to similar drawings Jorn did at the time for Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires, book projects in which he experimented with dripped gestures (figure 28). These books are relics of Situationist collaboration, made by Jorn with Guy Debord and the printers Permild and Rosengreen in Copenhagen in 1957 and 1958. The drip process Jorn used in the books was a specific pastiche of Pollock’s method. A pale green image at the end of Mémoires directly evokes the Pollock reproduction in Pour la forme, although its quiet tone and childlike, diminutive form contrast with the dynamism of the Pollock image. Other Jorn drawings evoke more violent drips, scrapings, scribblings, and attenuated tracings. The two Situationist books are marked by their deadpan critical deconstruction of both popular and high culture through a collage approach that decontextualizes images and text appropriated from the mass media in floating fragments. They usurp the power of the “spectacle” to colonize our private desires by liberating its signifiers in the private and diminutive space of the page.

For the drawings in Fin de Copenhague, the earlier book, Jorn dropped lithographic ink from the top of a fourteen-step ladder, throwing the ink, in some cases cup and all, three meters below onto folios laid on the floor. He also turned the pages to let the wet ink flow in various
directions, and the printers printed them in bright, pop colors. Jorn’s process removed the artist much further than Pollock’s method did from control over the final image, as well as from the relative beauty and elegance apparent in Pollock’s large-format drip paintings with their graceful and balanced compositions. Jorn’s pastiche of the drip method increased the distance between artist and canvas. He thus applied the drip as a mark of the artist’s physical experience and distance from the support rather than any trace or tache of the artist’s controlled movement. In contrast to Pollock’s looping skeins of paint, Jorn’s drips embody disorder as they splash and run in all directions.

Most scholarship on Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires reiterates the Situationist fiction that the books were made entirely of preexisting elements. In fact, Jorn added singular gestures in the ink drips that set spectacular culture in direct dialogue with the conventions of abstract painting, implying the direct continuity between high and low. The colors emphasize their own pop vulgarity, as opposed to the classic blacks, whites, and tans of Pollock’s large-scale works. In places, they represent fist-prints that parody the handprints, references to the primeval creator, in some of Pollock’s paintings. They take Pollock’s method to a new extreme, as both homage and critique. Jorn’s drip pastiche incorporated chance in such a profound way that it revealed Pollock’s process itself as a more personalized gesture, with its relative intimacy and primacy as a direct trace of the artist’s bodily movements. Indeed, Pollock famously denied the use of chance in his own work, asserting that even in drip painting, “with experience, it seems to be possible to control the flow of paint, to a great extent, and . . . I don’t use the accident.”

Jorn’s method created drip gestures minus Pollock’s dancelike control with all its implications of a new kind of virtuosity. Jorn’s drips were gestures as well, but of a bodily movement that was more abandoned to chance and indeterminate in its outcome. The printed drips in both Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires depict the reminiscence of a gesture twice removed, through the trace of the more violent brush throws which are then reproduced by printing. The books directly incorporate mechanical reproduction in their gestures, asserting that the gesture is still possible but that it is always mediated in the viewer’s reception of it.

Jorn’s critique of the Abstract Expressionist artist is apparent from the title of a key painting from 1958, Ausverkauf einer Seele (A soul for sale) (plate 17). With its large scale, sweeping gestures, and loops of paint drips à la Pollock, it invites comparison with the Abstract Expressionist idiom, yet on closer viewing the erratic and interrupted appearance of Jorn’s gestures becomes apparent. Grotesque images also leer out of the work, disrupting its apparent lyricism. Jorn parodies the voice of the “ad man” in the title. He connects his own work explicitly with commerce, and thus defies the conventional autonomy of art in bourgeois society that his con-
tinued use of painting on canvas otherwise promotes. 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 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 in society.25 Jorn ridicules this implicit role of cultural production by asserting that art cannot be maintained as a pure site of rejection that renders itself powerless in its own autonomy. Jorn use of titles itself separates his work from the bulk of Abstract Expressionism, with its artists’ general indifference to titles (as with Pollock) or outright hostility to them (as with Still). His titles mediate the relationship of his works to their audiences, emphasizing the framing element and thus the social and dialogical nature of the artwork.

This title may have also been a direct dig at the Abstract Expressionist artist. Jorn explicitly critiqued the construction of the incommunicative, incorrigible, inevitably self-destructive expressionist artist by the popular media in relation to Pollock and Wols.26 He also criticized the insular formalism of action painting. He wrote:

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.27

Jorn critiqued not only the formulation of “action painting” that he felt made action painting nothing more than show-business, but also Greenberg’s use of the publicity language of media-friendly sports like boxing in his descriptions of the “strength” of various painters.28 Jorn thus criticized the American painters and critics for their political uncriticalness. His viewpoint was, I would add, only possible because of his own unawareness of either the early development of Abstract Expressionism or the ongoing politically engaged writing of artists such as Barnett Newman. Only understanding the movement in the highly politicized context of postwar European reception and France in particular, Jorn viewed it reductively as apolitical.
THE LUXURY PAINTINGS

Jorn pushed Pollock’s *drip method* in the direction of more overt pastiche in the Luxury Paintings of 1961, where Jorn splattered synthetic lacquer paint and produced lines using string and marbles dipped in paint (figure 29).79 Jorn’s use of lacquer rather than oil paint in these works may have been directly inspired by Pollock’s own unorthodox use of materials.80 Lacquer evokes both the luxury object of high-end decorative arts, referring to art’s economic status, and at the same time the baser connotation of industrial paint, such as the commercial paints and enamels Pollock himself used.81 For Jorn, it *pointed to the sliding scale of value*, oscillating *between the two artificial poles of high and low*, which he theorized as subjectively assigned to objects. While Pollock himself did not acknowledge the significance of mass culture and everyday life which his choice of materials could in retrospect be seen to reflect, Jorn was deliberately inviting a *comparison* with the non-artistic, or kitsch. Through his framing acts of titling and theoretical writing, Jorn made apparent the social aspect of this material, as both a comment on the artwork as a luxury object and a way of emphasizing the object literalness rather than the representational quality of the works.

The title of the Luxury Paintings was itself a pastiche of the marketing of artworks, related to Jorn’s conception of the social relevance of art as a luxury or surplus. The concept of *surplus* or luxury was central to Jorn’s *definition of art*, as a source of “counter-value” that negates all conventional concepts of practical value. In terms reminiscent of Bataille, he wrote, “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.”82 His *Luxury title*, then, was not just a fairly obvious pastiche of the economic role of the art market. It was also a statement on art as a site of innovation and reshuffling of social values, conventionally useless and for that reason crucial to society.

In the “Luxury Paintings,” Jorn used string to *create lines that were imprints of objects rather than gestures of the brush or body*. Unlike Pollock’s large-scale drips, Jorn’s string-lines are deliberately limpid, irregular, and awkward. A work like *Allmen* of 1961 juxtaposes looped string lines with allover splatters in intensely bright, cheerful colors. Jorn’s relatively evenly distributed drips *create a rich texture across the surface*. The “Luxury” works recall Impressionist daylight scenes in their speckled luminosity; Jorn himself noted their debt to both Tachism and Impressionism.83 *Allmen* exemplifies the manner in which Jorn’s works communicate humor visually in the relationship of *abstract forms* themselves. The central orange form invites touch with its vividly wrinkled, shiny surface. This thick blob of congealed lacquer exhibits a deliberate vulgarity in its unmistakable anatomical shape. Jorn compounds this base materialism by
adding a scatological brown-green splatter that appears to be expelled from the lower end of the orange form. These ridiculously somatic shapes halt vision on the surface of the picture—just as Pollock did through his use of aluminum paint, but in a much more visceral way. The title Allmen evokes the Danish (and German) prefix “almen-,” meaning “common,” an evocation of populism, deliberate vulgarity, and materialism in the sense of the common or ordinary object.

Dismissed as unoriginal by critics at the time,84 Jorn’s process in fact acknowledges the falseness of the idea of the original gesture, the innocent or unprecedented mark, by directly encompassing the widely publicized style of another artist. It still manifests its own singularity
as a trace of an action, however modest, but also acknowledges the inevitable existence of precedents that define in advance the conception of that action itself. The Luxury Pictures are distinguished from Tachism and Abstract Expressionism by their lightness and humor as well as their open acknowledgement of their commodity status. The works combine Jorn’s techniques of parody, pastiche, and materialism in forms that were singular and process-oriented but at the same time fully conscious of the impossibility of originality in an era dominated by mass media and its promotional techniques.

Jorn was never interested in simple critique, but always in a positive creation, which was the origin of his break with the Debordian Situationists, and something that I risk distorting in emphasizing the critical aspects of his gestural techniques. Yet Jorn himself observed that nothing new could be created without a critical attitude to things as they exist. He applied the strategies of materialism, parody, and pastiche to create gestures directly critical of the increasingly apolitical rhetoric of transcendence in both Abstract Expressionism and Tachism. The artworks I have singled out here manifest a gesture of singular rather than individual subjectivity. Abstract Expressionism and Informel manifest a more traditional individualist conception because although they replace the classic Expressionist internal subjectivity with one developing in constant dialogue with the environment, they remain emblematic of a heroic subjectivity isolated from the community. Jorn’s singular gestures, by contrast, employed artistic objects as a means to develop a subjectivity more fully aware of social reality. What makes Jorn’s view so relevant—and so contemporary—is his assumption that painting was no longer a sacred space that symbolized the free reign of the imagination, but rather an everyday object that facilitated both imagination and critical thought by means of a sensory address. What mattered to Jorn was art’s dynamic effect on the viewer, where the artist’s role is that of an initiator rather than an expresser of inner feelings.
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3. Ibid., 330.
6. Ibid., 170–72.
10. Ibid., 159.

Ironic Gestures: Asger Jorn, Informel, and Abstract Expressionism

1. Mathieu refers frequently to the idea that "signs precede their signification" in lyrical abstraction. Georges Mathieu, *De la Révolte à la renaissance: Au-delà du Tachisme* (1963) (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 360. His performances made unavoidable, however, the conclusion that the primary meaning of these signs for Mathieu was their indexical relation to the artist himself.
2. Almost all Jorn's artwork is found in European collections, and the artist had few dealers in the United States, in part because Jorn, a socialist activist since his early days in Silkeborg, refused to enter a country where he would have to sign a paper certifying that he was not a Communist.


8. “Intention og kunst er det samme,” Asger Jorn, “Tegn og Underlige Gerninger eller Magi og de skønne kunster” (Signs and strange actions or magic and the fine arts), (Silkeborg Kunstmuseum Archives, 1954), n.p.

9. “Il n’y a pas d’identité entre impression et expression là où il y a œuvre d’art. Non plus entre les intentions conscientes ou inconscientes de l’artiste et la réalisation de l’expression dans une matière. Pas davantage entre l’expression de l’artiste et l’impression du public... L’artiste est... dans la communauté le véritable agent de dénivellation, de mouvement et de déséquilibre.” Jorn, “Pour la forme,” 530.

10. For Nancy, singularity is an ontological condition. He defines the self as the singularity which co-appears or “compares” (*com-parait*) simultaneously to the idea of community, and is thus inseparable from it. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (1986), ed. Peter Connog (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–42.


Informel a few months before Tapié, but he is actually known for his conception of "abstraction lyrique," Mathieu, *De la Révolte à la renaissance: Au-delà du Tachisme*, 357–60. Jorn’s work was briefly connected to Informel when Tapié included Jorn’s *Raft of the Medusa* in an exhibition in Rome in 1953. Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994), 2:15.

17. Other key exhibitions include Tapié’s "H.W.P.S.M.T.B. [Hartung, Wols, Picabia, Stahly, Mathieu, Tapié, Bryen]" in 1948, Tapié’s "Art autre" of 1952, and Estienne’s Salons d’Octobre, inaugurated the same year.


28. He discusses Tachisme in the key 1955 manuscripts “Om kunst i Europa og Danmark efter krigen (uden titel)” and "Forundring—beundring—begejstring," Silkeborg Kunstmuseum Archives, and


31. The text was signed by Khatib, Korun, Debond, Platschek, Pinot-Gallizio, and Jorn. Translated in Ken Knabb, ed., Situationist International Anthology (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 48–49. Jorn may not have been at the action in Belgium (he seems to have been en route between Munich and Albisola at the time). He most likely supported the playful disruption of the action, with its wake-up call to critics like Sweeney who supported the work of a number of Jorn's ex-Cobra colleagues, even if its polemical wording belongs to the French milieu of Debord's circle, in self-conscious imitation of the prewar avant-gardes.

32. Jorn, "Pour la forme," 545. Jorn may have reacted specifically to Malraux, The Voices of Silence, 283, where Malraux claims that prehistoric art began with "the sacred, the divine, before turning towards man."


36. Jorn's occasional hyperbole in referring to his friends as "geniuses" indicates that he was at times infected by the mainstream discourse of Informel, but in his more sober writing, as in his painting itself, he develops an ironic critique of the gesture as a record of genius. Asger Jorn, "L'État des passions au milieu du XXe siècle et Gallizio-le-tatoué," in Pinot Gallizio (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, 1960).

37. For a reproduction, see Asger Jorn: Malerier, keramik, skulpturer (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 1995), 65.

39. Incidentally, this process of making materiality dominant over the individualist gesture also has parallels in Abstract Expressionism. Jack Tworkov, for example, praises Soutine for displaying qualities sought by contemporary painters such as “that quality of surface which appears as if it had happened rather than as [being] made.” It was largely the critics and the popular press who made ubiquitous the understanding of Abstract Expressionism as an art of the gestures of tormented genius. Tworkov, “The Wandering Soutine,” *Art News* 49, no. 7 (November 1950): 32, quoted in Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 100.


44. Jorn’s Italian colleagues saw Pollock in 1950 at the U.S. pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and Sergio Dangelò viewed watercolors by the artist in Milan. Dangelò avows that in 1950, all he and his colleagues Dova and Peverelli cared about was Pollock and Wols. At the time, they all tried painting in enamels on the floor. Sauvage, *Arte nucleare*, 20, 130. Drips were used in Baj’s painting in the early 1950s, when they also appeared in Jorn’s.

45. On the traditional Cartesian construction of the gaze and its disembodiment of the subject, see Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

46. By the mid-1950s Jorn's standard process was to paint on a canvas laid out on a table or directly on the ground.


49. The bearded face, symbolic of folk- and, later, counter-culture, was one of Jorn's favorite images of popular and medieval art. Jorn certainly would have appreciated Dubuffet's series of "Beards," begun in 1959 and exemplifying the same mixture of celebration and anti-cultural associations, although Jorn's interest in the beard stems from the Cobra period if not earlier. The beard also identifies the god Freyr, discussed in Asger Jorn, "Le Frey (Fró): De la fête populaire au mythe universel," Cobra 7 (1950): 14–15.


51. Duchamp made a similar move in Pharmacie of 1914, where across from the artist's printed signature he added "PHARMACIE, MARCEL DUCHAMP, 1914." Writing his name in all caps, he attempted to depersonalize the gesture. For a reproduction, see Arturo Schwartz, ed., The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp (New York: Delano Greenidge, 2000), 597.


53. He wrote that Norman church graffiti expressed a popular opposition to the isolation of artistic objects in Medieval churches, which held valuable objects (such as reliquaries) outside of social circulation. Jorn, "Sauvagerie, barbarie et civilisation," in Jorn et al., Signes gravés, 247.


55. In 1949, Jorn had written to Constant of his idea to create "La section d'amélioration des anciennes toiles" (The Department for the Improvement of Old Canvases). He specified that the function of these works would be not negative like a Surrealist satire, but positive, in order to preserve the "actualité [actualité]" of old pictures and save them from oblivion. Jorn, letter to Constant, 1949–50, Constant Archives, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Hague, Netherlands.

56. See Gether et al., eds., Asger Jorn, 48.


59. In using the term pastiche, I am not revisiting Hal Foster’s interpretation of postmodern pastiche as allied with a neoconservative politics of the status quo. See Foster, “(Post) Modern Polemics,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: New Press, 1985), 121–36. I believe such characterizations conflate aesthetic forms with the sometimes conservative politics of their makers and ignore the basic irony inherent in the practice of pastiche, which indicates a disjunction between an existing form and its original content versus its present theoretical implications. Jorn’s use of parody and pastiche is closer to that described by Benjamin Buchloh in “Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke [1982],” *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 343–64. But unlike Buchloh, I interpret Jorn’s use of pastiche as extending to institutional critique, by refusing the very conception of authenticity on which the conception of art as autonomous from the market and from politics depends.


62. According to Paul de Man, irony makes authenticity impossible because it reflects the self as complex, split into opposing aspects which the ironic work reveals to be coexisting. De Man’s discussion of the operation of irony as a double structure of language that allows for no totality, but rather situates consciousness in a momentary realization of its inauthenticity, relates closely to Jorn’s approach. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 214–26.


64. For a discussion of the artist’s own “truth” as basic to art, see Malraux, *The Psychology of Art*, vol. 2, 153–54. Tapié was particularly concerned with “authenticity,” as demonstrated in *Un Art autrè*. Motherwell summarizes Abstract Expressionism as a kind of truth to experience, as opposed to entrenched dogmas, in Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, xiii. William Seitz foregrounds “truth” as a key concept for the movement as one of its “spirit characteristics.” Seitz writes that, “Art is a quest for reality and truth as subjectively apprehended and created. . . . Differing (but related) realities are those of the picture’s physical existence, the truth of immediate perceptual and emotional responses, and the transcendental reality which begins to approach a
mystical dissolution of the ego." Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, 152. Many painters consistently referred to "authenticity," "integrity," and "truth" in the American school, as noted by Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 230–33. Even when Rothko argued for the importance of "irony" in his work in his famous 1958 artistic statement, the tone of his overall approach continued to frame painting as a sincere investigation of the artist's understanding of the world. He redefined irony in his own terms as a concept that enabled him to more appropriately express his interpretation of the world, or as he put it, "the human drama as much as I can possibly experience it." Dore Ashton, "Art: Lecture by Rothko," *New York Times*, October 31, 1958, 26. Greenberg's positivist rhetoric, while separating itself from concerns of personal expression, relies equally firmly on a conception of the increasing literalness of abstract art as a truth or integrity to its own materials. Rosenberg, finally, refers directly to the authenticity of the artist's effort as an indicator of artistic quality. He writes, "The test of any of the new painting is its seriousness, and its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's total effort to make over his experience." Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 33.


67. *50 Ans d'art aux États-Unis* (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1955), cat. 87. It is titled *Number 1* in the catalog, but I am following the current title used by the Museum of Modern Art, which purchased the painting in 1950.

68. Jorn, "Pour la forme," 408.


71. Troels Andersen and Aksel Evin Olesen, eds., *Erindringer om Asger Jorn* (Silkeborg: Galerie Moderne, 1982), 180.


73. For *Mémoires*, Jorn instructed the printers to print the drip drawings—overlaid with the snip-


76. He lamented the self-destruction of artists like Pollock and Wols, who pushed their art to such an extremist emotional pitch that, seemingly as a result of this excessive intensity, it became suicide. Asger Jorn and Georg Andrésen, “Asger Jorn hjemme: Jeg er totalt færdig med dansk kulturliv,” Kunst [Copenhagen] 7, no. 5 (1960): 127.


80. Lacquer, of course, is a general term indicating a variety of different paints used today in industrial uses, such as furniture and appliance painting. I have not been able to determine specifically what kind of lacquer Jorn used, but it must have been a synthetic paint bought in a can to have created such splatter and pour effects. This was verified by Troels Andersen, e-mail correspondence, July 16, 2004.

81. Pollock himself never explained why he turned to industrial paints, although Lee Krasner and later critics specified that it was most likely the material liquidity of the paints themselves, which lent them to dripping in a way impossible with oils, at a time before the advent of acrylics. Barbara Rose, “Jackson Pollock at Work: Interview with Lee Krasner [1980],” in Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Abrams, 1999), 43. Bois insistently differentiates Pollock’s use of industrial materials from any association with the culture industry, asserting that they are rather part of the internal critical dialogue of high modernism. He writes that these materials adulterate the modernist dogma of pure visuality by “referencing” kitsch, but are nevertheless firmly separated from mass or low culture itself. Yve-Alain Bois, “Kitsch,” in Bois and Krauss, Formless: A User’s Guide, 123–24. Yet, as T. J. Clark acknowledges, Pollock’s colors are
insistently material: aluminum, not silver. “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 331. I would argue that Pollock’s use of these materials cannot be separated from kitsch since the use of such low-cost industrial materials by the Abstract Expressionists in general emphasizes in a material sense the continuum of painting with everyday material culture. In other words, although Abstract Expressionism today has been incorporated into the canon of high modernism, its insistently material literalness actually heightens our experience of it as an ordinary object.


**Greenberg Misreading Dubuffet**

This paper, delivered on May 19, 2004, at the first annual Pollock-Krasner Study Center conference, was originally titled “Greenberg’s Dubuffet.” Shortly after the conference, I received, via Columbia University’s Office of Interlibrary Loan, a microfiche version of Sophie Berrebi’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Outsider as Insider: Jean Dubuffet and the United States 1945–1973* (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2002), which includes a subsection of a chapter devoted to “Greenberg’s Dubuffet” (97–109). In deference to Dr. Berrebi, I have retitled my paper here.

2. Ibid., 124–25.