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Expression as Vandalism: Asger Jorn's Modifications

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Expression as vandalism

Asger Jorn's "Modifications"

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In a 1962 painting, Danish Situationist and artist Asger Jorn declared in a graffiti-like gesture that “the avant-garde won’t give up.” The phrase appeared not 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. 1). As part of the series “New Disfigurations” exhibited at Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris that year, the work resumed Jorn’s “Modifications,” first shown in May 1959. These works developed directly out of Jorn’s participation in the Situationist International (SI) group, which Jorn cofounded in 1957 along with Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, Ralph Rumney, Walter Olmo, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone, and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio. In the “Modifications,” Jorn added grotesque imagery or abstract painted or dripped additions to amateur academic-style paintings found in flea markets.¹ Here, Jorn has added not only the scribbled text, but also crude drawings of a bird and a stick figure, a simulated street wall behind the figure, and finally, a Duchampian moustache and goatee to the girl’s face. In classic avant-garde provocation, Jorn lampoons the bourgeois propriety of the girl by vandalizing her portrait. He accomplishes this both through the facial additions and the vulgarity of the graffiti text, applied in the high-art medium of oil paint, appearing behind the girl as if out of the repressed unconscious of the history of painting. 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 joke.² The graffiti, too, is

ironic. It begs the question: What about the avant-garde? In this essay I ask: How did the “Modifications” 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?

The question can only be addressed by considering the potential differences between Jorn’s “Modifications” and those made by non-Situationist artists Enrico Baj and Daniel Spoerri at almost exactly the same historical moment. As objects, these works suggest similar (though not identical) critiques of the institutional cooptation of avant-garde strategies through the incorporation and subsequent vandalism of kitsch, yet the artists and the collectives with which they were allied differed radically on what the “Modifications” meant. While Baj considered them an innovation in modernist art-making, Spoerri regarded them as provocations attacking painting as a medium. Jorn’s position remains the most complex of the three: Jorn framed the “Modifications” as Situationist subversion even as he related them to his long-standing interest in popular art. Jorn’s “Modifications” were neither modernist nor iconoclastic, but considered kitsch a form of folk creativity unfairly marginalized from the discourses of both modernism and the avant-garde precisely because of their social elitism and embrace of outmoded conceptions of progress.

The question for all three artists, in 1959, was indeed how the avant-garde could remain adversarial in the very moment when Abstract Expressionist painting was being hailed as the art of Western freedom in Europe and America; in a time when national institutions were coopting the avant-garde’s use of personal expression as an oppositional tactic and turning it into the spectacle of genius. Gestural abstract painting came to dominate the art market as well as discussions of the so-called School of Paris by the mid-1950s. French artists and critics who championed gestural painting, then, were put into the position of either linking the art they championed to the new American developments, as did Michel Tapié, Georges Matheiu, and Edouard Jaguer; or taking a more defensive position of upholding the School of Paris as the continued site of innovation, as did cultural bureaucrats like Musée National d’Art Moderne director

1. Troels Andersen, “Jorn and International Situationism,” in *Asger Jorn: Modifications*, ed. Ronny Van de Velde (Antwerp: Ronny Van de Velde, 1998); Freddy De Vree, “Modifications,” in *ibid.*

2. Theodor Adorno wrote a decade later: “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.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970], trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 24–25.



Figure 1. Asger Jorn, *L'avant-garde se rend pas*, "Nouvelle défigurations" ("New Disfigurations") series, 1962. Oil on found canvas, 73 x 60 cm. Collection P. and M. Alechinsky. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

Jean Cassou.³ By the end of the decade it was clear that the latter group was on the "losing" side of a history that would now be written by the American cultural "victors." As Blair Fowkes and Nancy Jachec observe, "Modernism was . . . central to the conducting of cultural diplomacy in Europe in the 1950s."⁴ The School of Paris, which began life as a network of avant-gardes set explicitly against the very idea of a school at all, had become utterly academic. The designation "avant-garde" began

3. Serge Guilbaut, "1955: The Year the Gaulois Fought the Cowboy," *The French Fifties*; *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000):167–168. See also the discussion in Serge Guilbaut, "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 30–84.

4. Reuben Fowkes and Nancy Jachec, "Introduction: Art and Politics in the 1950s," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006):130.

to be used regularly as a form of praise for modernist movements precisely in the postwar period.⁵ For many observers, it came to signify little more than a market placement for artists, a good financial strategy, and a sign of cachet.⁶ Art critic Alain Jouffroy concluded

5. Hubert Van Den Berg, "Kortlægning af gamle spor af det nye: Bidrag til en historisk topografi over det 20. århunderts europæiske avantgarde(r)," in *En tradition af opbrud: Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, ed. Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, and Charlotte Engberg (Hellerup: Spring 2005).

6. Constant, "Montée et décadence de l'avant-garde [1964]," in *New Babylon: Art et utopie. Textes situationnistes*, ed. Jean-Clarence Lambert (Paris: Cercle de l'Art, 1997), p. 129; Michel Ragon, *L'art: Pour quoi faire?* (Brussels: Casterman, 1971), p. 119. See also Robert Estivals, *L'avant-garde culturel parisien depuis 1945* (Paris: Guy Leprat, 1962), which concludes that the present Parisian avant-garde is plagued by mediocrity due to petit-bourgeois overemphasis of the individual ego.

that modern art had been utterly commercialized and recuperated, declaring: "The total victory of modern art on all fronts—commercial, intellectual, and cultural—in my view amounts to the most beautiful funeral ever imagined."⁷ In 1959, MoMA allied with the US Information Agency sent the "New American Painting" show and the Jackson Pollock retrospective to Paris, and French critics drew parallels between Abstract Expressionism and Informel as the international style of cultural and political freedom.⁸ The American promotion of its own innovations in modernism as an international cultural front in the Cold War has been well documented. Less well known in the United States is the complexity of European discourse in a situation where the U.S. art world was seemingly coopting the discourse of the European avant-garde. The vehement Situationist response to the institutionalization of modernism in the 1950s was only the most radical in a wide spectrum critical of American cultural imperialism.

The annexation of avant-garde strategies to official culture exemplified a process the Situationists called "recuperation." Asger Jorn's "Modifications" were part of the Situationist strategy of "détournement" developed precisely to combat its institutional counterpart, recuperation. Détournement and recuperation can only be understood in direct relation to each other, since they operate as a sort of hinge between authority and subversion. They reveal power as a dialectic, never static but incessantly reestablished through struggle. The SI was the first group to foreground this process in its early writings (even if later SI theory tends to reify power as static and all-encompassing). In the 1950s, Situationist theory made clear that any oppositional avant-garde would become recuperated and thus negated by the institutions of spectacular culture the moment it became "documented." Wariness of the ongoing problematic of recuperation remains necessary, given the subtlety of the problem of spectacularization itself—the process by which those who control the spectacular culture

7. Alain Jouffroy, "Situation de la jeune peinture à Paris," *Preuves* 68 (October 1956):25, quoted in Natalie Adamson, "'An Ambiguous Meaning Links Us to History': Reconsidering the Situation of *la jeune peinture* in Paris, 1956," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006):147.

8. See Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* 11, no. 9 (1973):43–54, Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (1974):39–41, Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 157–224.

embodied most obviously in the mass media coopt all revolutionary ideas by publicizing a neutralized version of them, literally turning oppositional tactics into ideology.⁹ The most blatant and increasingly ubiquitous form of recuperation in the postwar period was in ads. According to the *Internationale situationniste*, "[i]f the word 'revolutionary' has been neutralized to the point of being used in advertising to describe the slightest change in an ever-changing commodity production, this is because the possibilities of a central desirable change are no longer expressed anywhere."¹⁰ The SI identified the threat of revolutionary tactics being absorbed and defused as reformist elements. In the art world, the danger became particularly acute in the late 1950s as participatory and performative artistic practices such as Happenings rejected the institutionalized version of abstract painting outright, but in what the SI considered a bland relationalist manner that remained firmly within the confines of the art world itself.¹¹ For the SI, the forms of "participation" within well-established art-world structures that Happenings suggested were little more than a reformist pseudo-participation and thus the worst form of pseudo-revolutionary practice. As they argued in "L'avant-garde de la présence": "We speak of the recuperation of free play when it is isolated on the sole terrain of actual artistic dissolution."¹² The SI pinpointed the increasingly evident problem of capitalist institutions subverting the terms of oppositional movements for their own uses, asserting that "it is the whole of present society that cannot avoid the problem of the recuperation of its countless alienated, uncontrolled capabilities."¹³ According to Situationist theory, which

9. See Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994), pp. 98–104.

10. "Instructions pour une prise d'armes," *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961):3; translated by Ken Knabb, available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/instructions.html>>.

11. "Relationalism," a term deriving from French curator Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics," has become a key term for contemporary art that invites audience participation. It has been criticized by some for the same reasons as Happenings by the SI, for effectively creating a pseudo-participation that replaces actual participation in the (political) public sphere. See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004):51–79, Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

12. "L'avant-garde de la présence," *Internationale situationniste* 8 (January 1963):20. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

13. "La frontière situationniste," *Internationale situationniste* 5 (December 1960):7, translation by Ken Knabb available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/frontier.html>>.

was a totalizing theory, recuperation operated on all fronts: in advertising, in academics, in public political discourse, in the marginal discourses of leftist factions, and so on.

The fact that recuperation took particularly visual forms in the increasingly prevalent postwar mass media led the Situationists to identify institutionalized social power as the “spectacle.” Even the most personal situations were becoming “spectacularized”—alienated from the once-private sphere of personal subjectivity—in the expansion of mass media forms such as television, cinemascope film, and LPs, and the proliferation of color-illustrated weeklies such as *Life* or *Paris Match*, which began publication in 1949. Jorn writes in his 1958 book *Pour la forme*: “Never in the history of humanity have people been confronted with so many images as modern man, for whom life is conditioned by publicity . . . and television. There is [as a result] only a decline in quality . . . a passage from the imaginist image to the reproductive and reproduced image.”¹⁴ Recuperation and spectacularization, then, are interchangeable terms.

As Stewart Home notes, however, it may be a mistake to call all public discussion of Situationist history “recuperation,” because it both attributes too much power to the spectacle and too little to the revolutionary contribution of the Situationist project.¹⁵ Some activists will continue to view all academic discussion as mere recuperation. Yet from the point of view of academic disciplines with their overt tendency toward elitism—of which art history is the most egregious example since it is devoted to the study of highly fetishized objects, in many cases objects that have become cultural or national heritage—it is well worth a continual subversion of the discipline’s historical tendency to canonize the most traditional forms of artistic practice by highlighting the overtly oppositional tactics of avant-gardes like the Situationists, whose very presence in the discourse of art history is (and ought to be) fraught with political controversy. This point may seem like an aside, but it is central to any academic reevaluation of a Situationist

project such as the “Modifications.” Although the “Modifications” of Baj, Jorn, and Spoerri are more than just a Situationist project, their primary significance lies not only in their challenge to the dominant discourses of art in the late 1950s, but also in their potential as exemplary tactics to trigger new and more sophisticated actions against the institutional discourse of art today, with its continuing tendency to reify itself.

The Situationists responded to the inevitability of recuperation with the only possible strategy, the demand that all cultural production “contain its own critique.”¹⁶ Jorn’s artistic strategy, developed in the context of COBRA and maintained throughout his life, was to maintain an absolutely utopian project: the continual emphasis on the process of creation over its final products—painting, that is, as a verb rather than a noun. The “Modifications” embody Jorn’s version of “détournement,” defined by the Situationist International as the “integration of past or existing artistic productions into a superior construction of milieu.”¹⁷ Détournement was an explicitly political practice, intended to devalue the discourse or institution it attacked (in the case of the “Modifications,” art, or more specifically, painting).¹⁸ The Situationists had experienced a decade in which prewar clichés of individual expression were artificially resuscitated, critics argued over whether abstract art had become academic, and modernism in all forms was turning into an ultra-individualist discourse known today as “high modernism.”¹⁹ The SI deliberately disrupted and disdained art world events. They called art critics “partial, incoherent and divided imbeciles . . . striving to transform their activities into institutions.”²⁰ The

16. “Communication Prioritaire,” *Internationale situationniste* 7 (April 1962):24.

17. “Définitions,” *Internationale situationniste* 1, no. 1 (1958):13. See also “Le détournement comme négation et prélude,” *Internationale situationniste* 3 (1959):78–79. Although détournement is sometimes translated as “subversion,” I retain the French term because of its historically specific Situationist etymology, and its combination of both “diversion” and “subversion.”

18. “Détournement from the interior of the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda that testifies to the weakening and loss of importance of these spheres.” See “Définitions” (ibid.):13.

19. Key documents of the return to an ultra-individualist paradigm of expressionism in France in this period are Charles Estienne, *L’art abstrait est-il un académisme?* (Paris: Editions de Beaune, 1950); Michel Tapié, *Un art autre, où il s’agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952); Michel Tapié, *Véhémenes confrontées* (Paris: Galerie Nina Dausset, 1951).

20. *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958), translated in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 48–49. This text is cosigned by

14. Asger Jorn, “Pour la forme: ébauche d’une méthodologie des arts [1958],” in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l’Internationale Situationniste*, ed. Gerard Berreby (Paris: Allia, 1985), p. 520.

15. Both Ralph Rumney and Stewart Home maintain that despite widespread protests among Situationist supporters against the 1989 exhibition *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time* at the ICA London, historicization does not necessarily neutralize the revolutionary content of the SI. See Rumney and Home, “The Situationist International and Its Historification,” and Home, “Aesthetics and Resistance: Totality Reconsidered,” both in Stewart Home, *What is Situationism? A Reader* (London: Aporia Press, 1991), pp. 134–139 and 40–42.

Situationists consciously revisited the disruptive anti-art tactics of the earlier avant-gardes, above all Dada and Surrealism, in order to resist the increasing ubiquity of art institutions turning expression into cultural capital. Coming to prominence in the very heyday of gestural abstraction was the art of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, and other “Neo-Dada” artists, whose art only addressed politics in an art-world context and was read as aestheticizing the politico-aesthetic tactics of Dada such as collage, the readymade, or the machine as artistic producer.²¹ The SI explicitly condemned these artists—in particular those like Klein, Tinguely, and Mathieu who were most spectacular in their attempts to supercede painting—for their reliance on “the simplicity of the recipe for Dadaism in reverse.”²² They condemned all artists who did not acknowledge the culture industry’s power to neutralize the critique their work embodied.

The SI took up Dada’s explicitly political legacy as an avant-garde in the sense defined by Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger. Poggioli, writing in the very moment of cultural apotheosis of the avant-garde, called the avant-garde an “extreme or supreme moment” of modern art²³ and modernism nothing but a “blind adoration of the social condition of modernity.”²⁴ Responding to Poggioli’s account, Bürger defined the “historical avant-garde” as the various groups who used artistic tactics before World War II to attack the institutions of art that enforced the autonomy of art from everyday life.²⁵ Bürger’s original account dismissed all postwar activity as “neo-avant-garde,” actions which in their “Neo-Dada” forms merely repeated avant-garde tactics in a depoliticized manner. In this schematic account, postwar artists only succeeded in *institutionalizing* the avant-garde as the most

“advanced” art. 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 prewar project of the historical avant-garde.²⁶ The distinction is largely academic, however: In the highly polemical Parisian context, it is literally a matter of perception how much the SI contested institutions themselves and the Nouveaux Réalistes simply spectacularized oppositional tactics. The Situationists, after all, staged interventions in art galleries even after their rejection of all artists in 1962.²⁷ Yet clearly *détournement*, as a practice of making an oppositional work using the imagery and materials provided by the establishment culture, directly revisited the historical avant-garde practice of collage.²⁸ Raoul Vaneigem argues that *détournement* is the most effective response to the threat of recuperation: “The spontaneous acts we see everywhere forming against power and its spectacle . . . must find a tactic taking into account the strength of the enemy and its means of recuperation. This tactic, which we are going to popularize, is *détournement*.”²⁹ Jorn’s “Modifications” were shown in an art gallery, but they were framed as an attack on the gallery from within. As Guy Atkins once noted: “I am told that art lovers are reluctant to begin their Jorn collection with one of these pictures.”³⁰ Even the second show of “Modifications” in 1962 was by Jorn’s own account a “disaster”—which

Jorn but he was absent for the action in which it was mobilized against the International Assembly of Art Critics.

21. On “Neo-Dada” in America, see Barbara Rose, “Dada, Then and Now [1963],” in *Pop Art: A Critical History*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 57–64.

22. “Absence and Its Consumers,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958):8, translation by John Shepley available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/absence.html>>. The Situationist attack on Nouveau Réalisme continues in “Once Again, on Decomposition,” *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961):12–13, translation by Shepley available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/decomposition.html>>.

23. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1962], trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 81.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

25. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1974], trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

26. Peter Bürger, “Til kritikken af neoavantgarden,” in *En tradition af opbrud: Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, ed. Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, and Charlotte Engberg (Hellerup: Spring, 2005), p. 75.

27. Guy Debord, “Les situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d’action dans la politique ou l’art,” in *Destruktion Af RSG-6: En Kollektiv Manifestation af Situationistisk Internationale* (Odense: Galerie EXI, 1963); J. V. Martin et al., *Operation ‘Playtime’: En kollektiv manifestation af Situationistisk Internationale* (Aarhus: Galerie Vestergade, 1967; reprint, *Situationistisk Revolution* [Århus] 2 [1967]).

28. Debord and Gil Wolman’s description of *détournement* mobilized terms directly reminiscent of Dada and Surrealist descriptions of collage: “The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. . . . The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organization of greater efficacy.” “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (May 1956), translated by Ken Knabb, available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/usersguide.html>>.

29. “Banalities de Base II,” *Internationale situationniste* 8 (January 1963):40.

30. Atkins in *Asger Jorn: Modifications* (see note 1), n.p.

in Situationist terms could only have been a positive indication of their critical potential.³¹ They were able to avoid recuperation even in the rapidly changing art world of 1962, which could not yet recognize their singular potential to critique establishment modernism while refusing the avant-garde's teleological embrace of progress and originality.

Although the "Modifications" were first exhibited in a Situationist context, the SI would fracture in 1961 into the orthodox group led by Guy Debord and the various groups of dissident artists, with Jorn moving fluidly between both camps. The ultimate rejection of art by the orthodox SI echoed the central disagreement between Jorn and Debord over the possibility of art-making as a critical tactic. Under the principal direction of Debord and younger Situationist members such as Vaneigem, who had no background in art, the SI turned away from art-making altogether. In 1961–1962, the group famously declared all art "anti-Situationist" and expelled the remaining artists in the group. Jorn left voluntarily, but he maintained a close friendship with Debord until Jorn's death in 1973. Notably, he supported through the increasingly lucrative sale of his pictures both orthodox Situationist activities and those of the dissident groups founded by the rejected artists, including his lover Jacqueline de Jong and brother Jørgen Nash.³² Most scholarship on the "Modifications" considers them part of the Situationist rejection of art. Jorn's viewpoint diverged, however, with the orthodox anti-art position of the Situationists. Jorn showed a much greater ambivalence than Debord toward the avant-garde itself. Already in the early 1960s, Robert Estivals observed that Debord was Hegelian in his desire to renew the avant-garde and foreground critique over the creation of works.³³ Debord clearly viewed the SI as the next phase in the avant-garde lineage from Dada to Lettrism, as he summarized in "Report on the Construction of

Situations."³⁴ While in the early 1960s Debord continued to claim that "we are the authentic avant-garde,"³⁵ Jorn at the same moment rejected the word "avant-garde" as no longer applicable to oppositional practices and returned to the COBRA term "experimental art."³⁶ Debord considered theory, and the definition of critical terms, central to the Situationist project, while Jorn favored continual creative action above all. Although their disagreements cannot be fully elaborated here, briefly stated Debord's orthodox SI refused to consider the possibility that physical creations could catalyze political action, an idea that was central to Jorn's unorthodox aesthetic theory.

In fact, the "Modifications" form part of a broader lineage of artistic "modifications" leading from Duchamp not only to Jorn, but also to other artists like Joan Miró, Baj, and Spoerri in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷ Jorn conceived his own "Modifications" in the COBRA period, as I will describe, just at the moment when Miró produced a few isolated works on pompier paintings in Spain. As previous scholarship has noted, Jorn's "Modifications" were unknowingly preceded by those of Miró.³⁸ The "Modifications" were a more fundamental

34. Guy Debord, "Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale," (Cosio d'Arroscia: 1957). Translated as "Report on the Construction of Situations," in Guy Debord and the *Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), pp. 29–50.

35. Letter to J. V. Martin, March 28, 1962. *Guy Debord, Correspondance* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1999), vol. 2, p. 134.

36. Asger Jorn, *Alfa og Omega. Second to None* [1963] (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1980), p. 151.

37. As Zweite notes, Arnulf Rainer also began painting in black on art reproductions in 1962 and Per Kirkeby made many overpaintings directly inspired by Jorn in the 1960s, but a discussion of these works is beyond the scope of this essay. Armin Zweite, "Modifikationen und Defigurationen," in *Asger Jorn 1914–1973*, ed. Armin Zweite (Munich: Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, 1987), p. 72.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 71, and Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: en biografi*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994), vol. 2, p. 83. Miró painted his characteristic abstractions over two bourgeois portraits, the first during the war in 1944 and the second in 1950, on a military portrait sent from a friend as a joke. As much as Jorn would have appreciated such gestures, however, we have no record that Jorn saw them. According to the Miró catalogue raisonné, the works were one-off pieces, shown only in the United States. Interestingly, Miró returned to the procedure with a small series of works painted on flea-market pictures in 1965, possibly inspired by Jorn, Baj, or Spoerri. See *Joan Miró: Catalogue Raisonné, Paintings*, ed. Jacques Dupin and Ariane Lelong-Mainaud, 6 vols. (Paris: Daniel Lelong/Successió Miró, 1999–2004), cat. nos. 708, 892, and pp. 1221–1224. In 1948, Aime Maeght exhibited many abstract Miró works from the series done at exactly the same time (and with the same motifs) as the 1944 "modification," so it is possible that

31. Jorn, undated letter to Guy Debord, sometime after his 1962 "New Disfigurations" exhibition. Debord responded in a letter to Jorn of August 23, 1962, that the failure of the "New Disfigurations" was honorable, and that it might even be beneficial for the market value of Jorn's paintings to drop. Both letters are in the Silkeborg Kunstmuseum archives.

32. On these projects, see the forthcoming volume of papers from the conference "Expect Everything, Fear Nothing: A Conference on the Second Situationist International," Copenhagen, March 2007. Information and videos are available online at <<http://destroysi.dk/video.html>>.

33. Estivals (see note 6), pp.185–205. Estivals's account is flawed, however, because it conceives of the avant-garde as a lineage of individual theorists rather than as a network of collectives.

aspect of Jorn's artistic practice than the Situationist rejection of art. Although he carried them out in the Situationist context of *détournement*, Jorn viewed them (as would Miró) more as a dialogue with traditional painting methods than a rejection of either painting or art. Modification was not a new approach to artistic creation, but a newly relevant tactic.³⁹ I will argue, moreover, that what differentiates Jorn's use of it from the simultaneous "Modifications" of Baj and Spoerri is its apposite combination of graffiti with kitsch as an attack on institutionalized modernist abstraction and its relation to the Situationist theory of *détournement*, which described tactics broader than simple artistic gestures. Modification as a tactic *détourned* the idea of originality, reframing it as a common response to an existing situation without throwing out the notion completely. In Jorn's case specifically, it was both a reinterpretation of painting as a popular medium and a reevaluation of Dada tactics. Jorn's "Modifications" rejected not painting itself, but specifically the idea of modernist painting, which was increasingly declaring itself "avant-garde." They eschewed modernism's now false claims to oppositionality through autonomy from mass culture and kitsch in favor of painting as an active, critical response to modernism. Their critique of modernism from within took up the project of the historical avant-garde epitomized by both Duchamp and Francis Picabia, attacking the mainstream modernist conception of painting as an endorsement of the social conditions of modernity. While both Jorn and Baj's projects attempted to ally modernist painting with the social accessibility of kitsch, all three sets of "Modifications" operated in direct opposition to the institutionalization of modernism in the postwar period.

Détournement meant an active engagement, a direct attack on the passivity of postwar society, in which, according to Debord, "all *real* activity has been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle."⁴⁰ The *Internationale situationniste*

described the "Modifications" as prime examples of *détournement*.⁴¹ Yet Jorn's practice differed from the Situationist definition in that he introduced original elements, painterly additions that Jorn in fact conceived as expressive forms. In *The Disquieting Duck* (fig. 2), one of the original "Modifications," these forms manifest as a giant monster rising out of the muck of the everyday, defacing the prepainted landscape. The "Modifications" set out to parody the institution of painting, but also relativize and renew the *medium* itself, which had been removed from everyday, untrained creativity. The *détournement* of oil paint into graffiti made Jorn's additions into transgressions of the previously finished canvas, producing a new state of perpetual unfinish, and attacking painting's relationship to skill, its implications of totality, and its separation from the realm of street life. The work he painted on exemplified an overtly anachronistic approach to painting, but one increasingly popular among the "craze" for amateur painting that took hold precisely in the 1950s and a style increasingly available in ordinary stores.⁴² This "pompiere" style 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 *Disquieting Duck* was likely a work made in an assembly-line process, in which one artist paints sky, one water, one trees, and so on, the last one adding an invented signature, to produce a series of virtually identical artworks.⁴³ Enrico Baj observed of the similar scenes used in his own "Modifications" (description follows) that "kitsch painting denies brutality and violence; it portrays peaceful scenes, flowers. . . . In fact, it's skilled painting, cliché upon cliché, that's sold in supermarkets."⁴⁴ While Jorn never used a similar scene twice, Baj made use of several highly similar scenes of the Alps or of Mediterranean fishermen, which make clear the assembly-line process that produced them.

Jorn began his "Modifications" in Paris, and many of his found canvases display scenes derived from all

Jorn, Baj, or Spoerri could have seen this work in Maeght's storeroom. Jorn, after all, met Constant in 1946 while at Pierre Loeb's gallery looking at some Miró paintings in storage.

39. I am following the distinction between institutional "strategies" versus oppositional "tactics" defined by Michel de Certeau in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). See the discussion in *The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, ed. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette (North Adams, Mass.: Mass MoCA, 2005).

40. Italics in original. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), pp. 21–22.

41. "Le *détournement* comme negation et prélude" (see note 17), pp. 10–11.

42. "Amateur Painting: It's a 'Craze,'" *Newsweek* 43 (January 11, 1954):50–52.

43. According to Troels Andersen, who has observed one of these factories in operation in Denmark. Email correspondence with the author, July 10, 2007.

44. Freddy De Vree, "Enrico Baj [interview]," in *Enrico Baj: Modifications*, ed. Ronny Van de Velde (Antwerp: Ronny Van de Velde, 1998), n.p.



Figure 2. Asger Jorn, *Le canard inquiétant* (*The Disquieting Duck*), "Modifications" series, 1959. Oil on found canvas. 53 x 64.5 cm. Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Denmark. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

manner of European avant-garde as well as pompier genres of the nineteenth century, most likely painted in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries only to arrive in the *marché aux puces* (flea market): French peasant scenes, British picturesque landscapes, German Romantic landscapes, neoclassical nudes, Orientalist scenes, battle scenes, military portraits, petit-bourgeois portraits, erotic portraits, Baroque-style mythic heroes, Symbolist imaginings, Impressionist landscapes or cityscapes. As Jacques Prévert observed, Jorn acted as "collaborator, translator, and presenter [*révélateur*] of minor unknown and departed painters who have left no name nor played any role in art history."⁴⁵ The "Modifications" speak of a dialogue rather than a negation, through humor and visual play. The composition of *Paris by Night* (fig. 3), an Impressionist-style scene of a spectator on a balcony, is dizzying in its progression from lower left to upper right. It is as if the slouching spectator's body itself propelled the electric light onto the boulevards below. Despite the classic Impressionist composition, however, this man is not a bourgeois but a working man, smoking and slouching against the railing. Jorn, a onetime Danish Communist,

chain smoker, and anything but a gentleman, would likely have sympathized with such a man. Jorn adds paint drips, a direct parody of Jackson Pollock, which heighten this effect by emphasizing the picture's energetic diagonal axis. Jorn's drips become a smiley-faced mask above the man, but one which expels its entrails over the surface of the picture in an almost musical accompaniment to him. Jorn always somehow preserves the old images, even amplifies them through composition as here. The paint drips apply what was at that point immediately recognizable as Pollock's signature abstract style to produce pictures, and the most mundane and childlike and obvious variety at that.

Jorn's drips, excessively sexual in their material presence, also invoke abjection. Not only do the smooth white drips link Pollock's method directly to bodily functions, but they also destroy any elements of transcendence in the original pictures. On both counts, they recall Picabia's overtly confrontational ink splatter called *The Holy Virgin* of 1920 (fig. 4), as well as the later Duchamp painting of 1946, entitled *Faulty Landscape*, which was determined in 1989 to consist of ejaculate on celluloid backed with black satin.⁴⁶ Jorn's

45. Jacques Prévert, "A Jorn," in *Nouvelles Défigurations' de Asger Jorn*, ed. R. A. Augustinci (Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche, 1962).

46. See *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Arturo Schwartz (New York: Delano Greenidge, 2000), cat. 517; and David



Figure 3. Asger Jorn, *Paris by Night*, "Modifications" series, 1959. Oil on found canvas. 53 x 37 cm. Collection P. and M. Alechinsky, Bougival, France. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

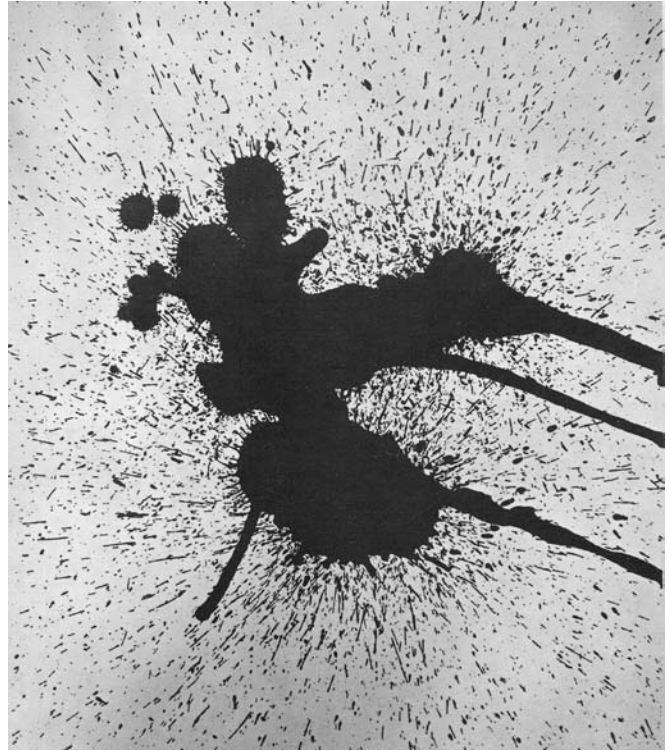


Figure 4. Francis Picabia, *La Sainte Vierge (The Holy Virgin)*, 1920. Ink on paper, reprinted in 391 no. 12, p. 3. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP.

additions are often overtly scatological and grotesque at the same time. Jorn's 1960 Modification *Mater Profana* was one of several "Modifications" based on overtly Catholic imagery (fig. 5).⁴⁷ Jorn painted it on an unfinished amateur religious painting begun by the father of Heimrad Prem, a German artist of Gruppe SPUR, a group of younger artists Jorn brought into the *Internationale situationniste*. When the work was shown in Galerie Van de Loo in Munich, the SPUR artists even held a short satirical "mass" before it, to the chagrin of Otto Van de Loo.⁴⁸ Taking up the Dada anticlerical spirit,

Mater Profana is explicitly Picabian, transforming the Virgin into a gaudily-costumed yellow-headed monster (or, alternately, a Virgin being swallowed by one) and making the sappy blue-eyed child shed a putrid yellow-ochre tear. Critic Alain Jouffroy wrote in 1962 that the art world was just beginning to appreciate Picabia as a painter "who refuses all integration, all assimilation."⁴⁹ Picabia's very refusal to stick to abstraction, his deliberate courting of popular art and blatant humor, took on new relevance for an art world trying to break out of the high seriousness of Informel.

Hopkins, "Questioning Dada's Potency: Picabia's 'La Sainte Vierge' and the Dialogue with Duchamp," *Art History* 15, no. 3 (1992):317–333.

47. The others include *Grand Baiser au Cardinal d'Amérique*, based on a portrait of a Cardinal, and *Le Cocuisinier*, based on a Madonna and child, reproduced in *Asger Jorn: Modifications* (see note 1), n.p.

48. Helmut Sturm told Troels Andersen this story, as recounted by Andersen in email correspondence with the author, July 9, 2007.

49. Alain Jouffroy, *Pour une révolution du regard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 125. This view of Picabia was radically different, of course, from the later view of scholars like Benjamin Buchloh regarding Picabia's kitsch works as a return to order. Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression [1981]," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 106–135.



Figure 5. Asger Jorn, *Mater Profana*, "Modifications" series, 1960. Oil on found hardboard, 81.5 x 51 cm. Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Denmark. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

The metamorphosis of a human image into a grotesque monster who seems to devour even as it transforms the original figure was a device Jorn used in several "Modifications." It is likely related to his own interest in the costuming of popular festivals, such as those depicted in his book of mythic symbols *The Golden Horns and the Wheel of Fortune*, or those in which he himself participated.⁵⁰ In 1955, soon after moving to Italy, Jorn took part in a spontaneous event to enact ceramist Tullio d'Albisola's tale *The Witches*, based on local folklore. Jorn and his friends dressed up in giant, grotesque papier-mâché masks and processed through town to the accompaniment of flutes and drums, ending with the enactment of a witch-burning on the

50. Asger Jorn, *Guldhorn og Lykkehjul/Les Cornes d'or et la roue de la fortune*, trans. Matie van Domselaer and Michel Ragon (Copenhagen: Selandia, 1957), figs. 54, 199, 252, 317, and 67.

beach at midnight.⁵¹ The event serves as a reminder that the monstrous figures in Jorn's work were primarily sympathetic figures, and as Jorn theorized in his *Golden Horns* text, they derived directly from ancient popular rituals and festivals.

In the "New Disfiguration" *Modification with Breton Wife* (fig. 6), a creature evoking at once X-rays, sexual effusion, and science-fiction aliens creeps quietly alongside an old Breton woman, another cliché of French modernist painting. The complex discourses of pompier and abstract painting clash with insidious, rancorous humor in the relationship of these "figures," recalling both Picabia and Jorn's Milanese colleague Enrico Baj. The X-ray-like figure directly recalls Baj's "Nuclear" paintings from the early 1950s, with their abstract skeletal outlines.⁵² Jorn met Baj in 1954, after Baj had agreed to be part of Jorn's International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB). Baj helped Jorn arrange the IMIB "International Ceramics Congresses" in Albisola in 1954–1955, and the two artists made several collaborative paintings in the late 1950s.⁵³ Baj and Jorn regularly visited flea markets together from around 1955 to 1959 in both Milan and Paris.⁵⁴ Baj recalls that while he sought materials in the flea markets for his multimedia abstract works, he appreciated the kitsch paintings found there and related them to the late figurative paintings of Picabia, which were considered equally kitsch ("*alimentaire*") at the time.⁵⁵ It was Picabia, rather than Duchamp, who directed Baj toward what he called "an art of negation, but a negation that was smiling and jovial."⁵⁶ The overt and audacious aesthetic contradictions in Picabia's work, from the early abstractions and Dada provocations to the late kitsch paintings, made Picabia an artist of renewed

51. Andersen (see note 38), vol. 2, pp. 32–35.

52. See Tristan Sauvage [Arturo Schwartz], *Arte nucleare* (Milan: Galleria Schwartz, 1962).

53. Luciano Caprile, "Jorn in Italy," in *Asger Jorn*, ed. Nuria Enguita Mayo (Barcelona: Fondació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), pp. 272–277.

54. Competing stories about the genesis of the "Modifications" still need to be sorted out. According to Ralph Rumney, he, Jorn, and Baj frequented the flea markets outside Milan where they found many "bad paintings displayed by the poor." Rumney maintains that the idea arose when "Someone said 'What if we altered them?'" Ralph Rumney, *The Consul*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (San Francisco: City Lights, 2002), p. 76. Jacqueline de Jong frequently accompanied Jorn on his flea market excursions and maintains that the old paintings were bought primarily in Paris. De Jong, email correspondence with the author, July 10, 2007.

55. De Vree (see note 44), n.p.

56. Ellen Wardwell Lee, "Baj on Baj: An Interview with Enrico Baj," in *Enrico Baj: Selections from the Milton D. Ratner Family Collection* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1978), n.p.



Figure 6. Asger Jorn, *Modification med Bretonekone* (*Modification with Breton Wife*), “Nouvelle défigurations” (“New Disfigurations”) series, 1962. Oil on found canvas, 72 x 59 cm. Cobra Museum, Amstelveen, the Netherlands. © 2007 Artist’s Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

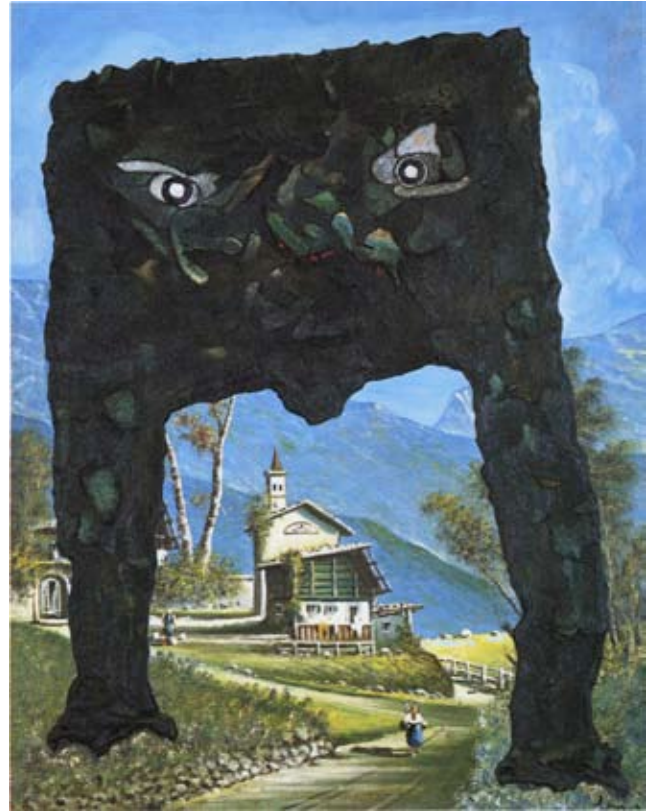


Figure 7. Enrico Baj, *L'invasion de la Suisse* (*The Invasion of Switzerland*), 1959. Mixed media on found oil on canvas. Private collection.

importance in a time when abstraction was faltering, art-world hegemony was shifting, and artists courted radical oppositions within their work as a way of contesting institutional recuperation.

Lawrence Alloway once referred to Jorn’s “Modifications” as “landing parties,” a reference to alien invasions clearly inspired by the monsters depicted by both Jorn and the Nuclear art group cofounded by Baj in Italy.⁵⁷ Baj produced his first “Modifications” in Milan in 1959, the same year Jorn’s were shown at Galerie Rive Gauche (Baj produced a later series in 1964 employing film poster painters to paint nude figures which he then modified). Baj’s *Invasion of Switzerland* (fig. 7) exemplifies his initial approach, which consisted

57. Alloway, cited in Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn, The Crucial Years, 1954–64: Paintings* (New York: Gruenbaum Gallery, 1977), p. 65.

of either blob-like UFO shapes or, as here, seemingly gigantic armless figures he called *ultracorpi* (“ultra-bodies”) invading the found imagery of pastoral alpine landscapes or Italian fishing scenes. Baj painted—or pasted—the thick, comically simple figures using an idiosyncratic mixture of media he called *acqua pesante* (“heavy water”), invented for his earlier abstract pictures and inspired in part by Jean Dubuffet’s *hautes pâtes* (“thick pastes”). The *acqua pesante* included anything from plaster and pigment to dirt and grass, resulting in figures much more impenetrable and earthy, less gestural and graffiti-like than Jorn’s. Baj gave his figures comically angry expressions by adding eyes, so that they emphatically suggest alien invasions, not only of monstrous figures into a pastoral scene, but of modernist flatness and overt materiality into the representational space of traditional painting. Yet, as Baj acknowledged, the traditional backdrop was essential to the meaning

of the works. Whereas Jorn emphasized the dialogue, however disjunctive, between old and new figures, for Baj the conventionality of kitsch pictures made his invading monsters look all the more unconventional (read: original).⁵⁸ Baj's works, with their striking opposition of pastoral scenes and radical modernist monsters, convey a more jolting effect than Jorn's, which preserve in their compositional structure a more direct dialogue with the original artists. Baj also, unlike Jorn, upheld a classic modernist embrace of autonomy, asserting that his "Modifications" were not political or about violating painting, because painting was "an art of silence, . . . a contemplative art, an art of reflection."⁵⁹ Baj's "Modifications" themselves, however, belie this statement in the extent to which, like those of Jorn, they preserve an active appearance of vandalizing an otherwise contemplative scene with a figure whose simplicity and physical texture inspire a more immediate and even physiological perception.

The idea of alien invasions arose out of an interest in science fiction shared by Jorn as well as the Italian signers of the "interplanetary art" manifesto.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the invading monsters signify at once a recognition of the popular creativity of science fiction, and the social recuperation taking place in the "Modifications" despite the populist intentions of both Baj and Jorn. Artworks made by artisan painters and amateurs are elevated from kitsch to art—even if the invaders also stand for the relative outsiders and gadflies of the mainstream art world known as the avant-garde. Jorn's *Disquieting Duck* is likely the most comparable Modification to Baj's *ultracorpi* in its depiction of a giant duck destroying a peaceful scene, but the colorful gestures that define Jorn's monster ally it to both children's art and graffiti. Baj's invading figures are also overtly outsider in their evocation of the armless figures of Dubuffet's *art brut*, but the dark tones and imposing slabs of real matter assert their absolute distance from the pompier aesthetic. Dubuffet's term *art brut* or "raw art" itself described an outsider art which Dubuffet was recuperating precisely as a subversion of institutional art discourse, another *détournement* slipping

into recuperation. In both sets of "Modifications," the foreignness of the added elements makes evident the process of recuperation occurring, despite the Situationist claim for the process as *détournement*, by nature of the art world's very economic structure: The new works are simply worth more than the pompier ones. The situation points to the dialectical relationship of the opposed terms and their inherent potential to be flipped.

Both Baj and Jorn maintained that they arrived at the idea of modifying found paintings independently in the same year, after several years of joint excursions to flea markets.⁶¹ Both artists began making "Modifications" in 1959 during a period in which they had only intermittent contact. Baj was explicitly against the ultra-political Situationists with whom Jorn began spending most of his time that year. Baj accused the future Situationists of "Stalinist" tendencies, asserting that "art is not a political party." He famously walked out of the 1956 "International Congress of Free Artists" in Alba, which led to the formation of the SI, because of the "very high levels of verbose rhetoric" exchanged there.⁶² After the congress, Baj and Jorn had little regular contact. Although Galerie Rive Gauche had represented Baj in addition to Jorn since 1958, Baj maintained that he came across Jorn's "Modifications" there accidentally, only later realizing he and Jorn had arrived at the same point.⁶³ This seems unlikely, considering that the two had collaborated to produce an exhibition in Milan of the Futurist artist Farfa just a few months earlier, when Jorn was in the midst of producing his "Modifications."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Baj's simultaneous development of "Modifications" problematizes the Situationist positioning of Jorn's series as *détournement* and indicates the extent to which the two artists' series present shared themes of appreciating the creative aspects of kitsch and identifying originality as an active response to a previous expression.

Nouveau Réaliste Daniel Spoerri also began producing "Modifications" in 1961, which he called *Détrompe l'oeil* (translated roughly as "Undeceive the Eye") pictures. These consisted of three-dimensional

58. Baj, "Concerning Coexistence and Modifications," *Documento-Sud 2* (Naples, 1959), translated in *The Catalogue Raisonné for Baj's Complete Works*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (Turin: Giulio Bolaffi, 1973), p. 18.

59. De Vree (see note 44), n.p.

60. Baj, et al., "Arte interplanetaria," *Il Gesto 4* (1959), translated in *The Catalogue Raisonné for Baj's Complete Works* (see note 58), pp. 17–18.

61. This point was verified by Jacqueline de Jong in email correspondence with the author, July 10, 2007.

62. Enrico Baj, "L'imaginisme et le nucléaire," in *Archives et documents situationnistes*, ed. Christophe Bourseiller (Paris: Denoel, 2001), pp. 131–132.

63. De Vree (see note 44), n.p.

64. *Farfa il futurista*, with texts by Enrico Baj and Asger Jorn (Milan: Galleria Blu, February 1959).

found objects attached to flea market paintings.⁶⁵ The most famous example was *The Shower* of 1961, which consists of a shower head and knobs mounted on an Alpine river landscape. It was Baj's dealer Arturo Schwartz who gave Spoerri his first one-person show in Milan in 1961, including the *Détrompe l'oeil* works, indicating the close social network connecting all three artists. The only *Détrompe l'oeil* work that sold from Spoerri's show in Milan, in fact, was one that Baj bought.⁶⁶ Spoerri's works were part of the Nouveau Réaliste attack on painting itself as an outmoded medium whether modernist or traditional—for Spoerri painting could simply no longer be avant-garde. Spoerri's assemblages destroy the illusionism of painting by attaching real objects onto the scenes.⁶⁷ They invade the viewer's everyday physical space and thus present painting as an outmoded object to a much greater degree than Baj or Jorn's works. In true avant-garde fashion, Spoerri maintained that the works were not art, but rather "a sort of information, of provocation."⁶⁸ Spoerri closely approached Jorn's attitude toward painting as a dynamic, galvanizing, anti-contemplative art when he argued that he rejected original creation, rejected originality, and wanted to make the viewer "uncomfortable."⁶⁹ His *Détrompe l'oeil* assemblages, perhaps themselves inspired by Jorn or Baj's "Modifications," developed in the same historic moment, but in the context of Nouveau Réalisme.

The Nouveau Réaliste group, conceived and defined by Pierre Restany, claimed to surpass the "ossification" of painterly expression with a new art of passionate engagement directly with the "real."⁷⁰ Spoerri did not subscribe to Restany's romantic terminology or his framing of all artistic actions as painterly "gestures," but through these works made in the context of Restany's group Spoerri gained his first real footing in the art

world. He used his Nouveau Réaliste contacts to carry out more radical anti-painting experiments later on, such as the restaurant Eat-Art Gallery in Düsseldorf (1970–1977) where a shifting range of artists cooked up the art, critics served it, and the public consumed it. In other words, like Jorn but unlike Baj, Spoerri participated in a number of activities that contextualized his creation of modified paintings and contributed directly to the meaning of the "Modifications" themselves as elements of a larger critical practice. The tactic of "Modifications" in its very structure acknowledges a wider context (a social "support"), which propels the artistic gesture itself, determining its reception, its meaning, and its power. The situation of their exhibition and critical deployment (for example, in the texts of *Internationale situationniste*) is not extrinsic but intrinsic to their meaning.

Even if all three artists had trouble selling their "Modifications," the increasing expertise of the institutions of modernism to recuperate all critical gestures set external limitations on their ability to contest the art world from within. These limitations were already apparent at the time: As John Ashbery noted, Spoerri's *Détrompe-l'oeil* work was "far less scandalous than its author supposes."⁷¹ If this sort of anti-painting was initially unpopular in France, its replacement by assemblages involving readymade, mass-produced detritus would soon seem trendily "avant-garde." While poorly received in America, the Nouveau Réaliste group quickly established commercial success in the European art world. Lacking a sophisticated theorization of the politics of détournement and recuperation, however, Nouveau Réalisme produced gallery-based works perceived in France by mainstream critics as well as by the Situationists as comfortable, defiant, and aestheticized.⁷² The group was regularly accused of simply transforming commodity fetishes into art-world fetishes; yet these accusations applied more to Yves Klein or Arman than to Spoerri himself. Spoerri's recuperation of refuse did not approach the signature appeal of Arman's collections of objects encased in glass, or Klein's spectacular manipulation of the media in his well-publicized black-tie events. The *Détrompe l'oeil* works, according to Jouffroy, resist the fetishizing "mise en spectacle" of the vitrine in favor of a more radical "deterritorialization" of the everyday into the vertical

65. Interestingly, these works were only recently labeled "Modifications" by Galerie Ronny Van de Velde in the exhibition "Modifications Baj—Jorn—Spoerri," April 18–July 12, 1998. See *Daniel Spoerri: Modifications*, ed. Ronny Van de Velde (Antwerp: Ronny Van de Velde, 1998).

66. Otto Hahn, *Daniel Spoerri* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), pp. 31–34.

67. Daniel Spoerri, *An Annotated Topography of Chance* (London: Atlas, 1995), p. 205.

68. Daniel Spoerri, "Tableaux-pièges," *Zero 3* (July 1961), reprinted in *1960 Les nouveaux réalistes* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1986), p. 266.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Pierre Restany, "Les nouveaux réalistes," 1960, reprinted in *1960 Les nouveaux réalistes* (see note 68), pp. 264–265.

71. John Ashbery, "Paris Letter," *Art International* 6, no. 3 (1962):61.

72. Jill Carrick, "Le Nouveau Réalisme: Fetishism and Consumer Spectacle in Postwar France" (Ph.D. diss., Bryn Mawr College, 1997), pp. 31–46.

space of vision.⁷³ Like Jorn and Baj, Spoerri embedded an aesthetic contradiction in a space physiologically, historically, and institutionally reserved for contemplation. For him it was an attempt to “dismantle the mechanism of artistic fetishism.”⁷⁴ The fact that this attack was read by the French press as reification only points again to the subtlety and potential slippage of the *détournement*/recuperation dialectic.

If we use the terminology of artistic progress, then Spoerri went “further” than Jorn in rejecting painting and traditional artistic process—ironically, given the Situationist denunciations of Spoerri and his colleagues. Yet Jorn’s series was singular in that it condemned precisely this type of teleological understanding of artistic creation. Jorn’s dialectical engagement with the modernist art attacked its most hallowed notions of originality and advancement. In “*Peinture détournée* (Detoured Painting),” the foreword to his 1959 “*Modifications*” exhibition, Jorn wrote:

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.
Why reject the old
if one can modernize it
with a few strokes of the brush?
This casts a bit of contemporaneity
on your old culture.
Be up to date,
and distinguished
at the same time.
Painting is over.
You might as well finish it off.
Detourn.
Long live painting.⁷⁵

The text is an ironic pastiche of the language of advertising. Jorn speaks like a traveling salesman to the institutional functionaries of the art world, lampooning the cliché of newness so crucial to modern art. His text calls ironic attention to the fact that painting had by the

end of the 1950s already been proclaimed dead enough times in modernist circles for its death to become a cliché—but it also exposes how the explosion of amateur and assembly-line processes helped kill it, precisely through popularization and thus recuperation. Jorn’s lines imply a carnivalesque exuberance and cyclical temporality, which explicitly rejects the concept of artistic progress, so essential to Western theories of progressive modernism.⁷⁶ They simultaneously attack both the inevitable commodification of modernism and the avant-garde taboos against traditional media (including, ultimately, the Situationist taboo against art). There is an insidious elitism inherent in all the “*Modifications*,” as in any avant-garde project (and Jorn’s own struggles to come to terms with the avant-garde are no exception), which is that the avant-garde’s search for new artistic methods always remains a search for originality and uniqueness. Jorn’s works best embody this contradiction precisely because they attack these notions directly, attempting to divorce originality from elitism, and novelty from progress.

Recent scholarship on the “*Modifications*” considers them part of the Situationist rejection of art. Claire Gilman describes them as demonstrations that the avant-garde is actually dead, its once-critical gestures now meaningless and thus collectible in the “neutral” format of the archive.⁷⁷ To this end, Debord and Gil Wolman wrote in 1956 that, “since the negation of the bourgeois conception of art and artistic genius has pretty much become old hat, [Duchamp’s] drawing of a moustache on the *Mona Lisa* is no more interesting than the original version of that painting.”⁷⁸ Jorn’s graffiti-like gestures, however, were more complex. They were an homage to the Duchampian act precisely through their parody of Duchamp. The Situationist text on *détournement* claims that the “*Modifications*” exemplify the “indifference to a meaningless and forgotten original.”⁷⁹ Yet Jorn’s copious writings attest that indifference was a concept he adamantly opposed. He wrote that the definition of art was agitation, something emphatically subjective

76. Stine Høholt, “The Carnavalesque as Artistic Strategy,” in Asger Jorn, ed. Christian Gether, Per Hovdenakk, and Stine Høholt (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 2002), p. 40.

77. Claire Gilman, “Asger Jorn’s Avant-Garde Archives [1997],” in Guy Debord and the Situationist International (see note 34), p. 192.

78. Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “Mode d’emploi du *détournement*,” *Les lèvres nues* 8 (May 1956), translated in *Situationist International Anthology* (see note 20), p. 9. Quoted in Gilman (ibid.), p. 189.

79. “Le *détournement* comme négation et prélude” (see note 17), pp. 78–79.

73. Alain Jouffroy and Patrick Beurard, “Daniel Spoerri: Souvenirs sans douleur,” *Opus International* 110 (1988):13–15.

74. Spoerri, quoted in Carrick (see note 72), p. 201.

75. Asger Jorn, “*Peinture détournée*” (Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche, 1959); reprinted in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*, ed. Elizabeth Sussmann (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989), pp. 140–142; p. 140.

and diametrically opposed to scientific objectivity. He specified that far from indifference, art meant desire, enthusiasm, inspiration, even fanaticism and intolerance.⁸⁰ The “Modifications,” then, were meant to inspire either our sympathy or our antipathy—to Jorn, it didn’t matter which. The avowed indifference to Duchamp’s vandalism was a conscious stance by Wolman and Debord against Neo-Dada, which does not adequately explain the combination of passion and humor generally evident in Jorn’s work.

Jorn’s use of graffiti foregrounded his unique conception of expression. Graffiti epitomized his idea of expression as fugitive, crudely direct, and ordinary rather than the product of a privileged subjectivity. Already appreciated by earlier artists from Brassai to Joan Miró, graffiti presents a relatively unmediated and untutored gesture and an indexical trace of a fleeting and libidinous presence.⁸¹ It specifically indicates an unauthorized defacement of valued property. Debord’s famous graffiti “Never Work,” scrawled on a Left Bank wall in 1953 and reproduced in the pages of *Internationale situationniste* ten years later, epitomized the Situationist conception of the gesture as polemical, anti-art, and arising out of everyday life. This was not the private everyday life emphasized by theorists of “everyday life” like Henri Lefebvre or Michel de Certeau, but rather public life on the street.⁸² In 1958, Pinot-Gallizio wrote a Situationist flyer titled “Difendete la libertà ovunque (Defend Freedom Everywhere)” in support of the art vandal Nunzio Van Guglielmi. The Milanese painter had been thrown into an insane asylum for mildly damaging a Raphael painting by pasting a revolutionary manifesto to its protective glass.⁸³ Jorn asked Baj to help distribute the flyer, which proclaimed that “Freedom consists above all in destroying false idols.” Jorn personally wrote the French follow-up tract “Au secours de Van Guglielmi!” which declared that

“Van Guglielmi’s reasons find themselves at the core of modern art, from Futurism to our own day. No judge, no psychiatrist, no museum director is capable of proving the contrary without falsification.”⁸⁴ In the Van Guglielmi affair, the Situationists and painters agreed that true expression did not mean making “art” but rather attacking cultural capital.

In 1964 Jorn edited a book on Norman church graffiti, *Signs Engraved on the Churches of Eure and Calvados*, with photos of graffiti carved into the walls of churches in the Medieval period (fig. 8). The book related to Jorn’s Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism, founded 1961, which attempted to demonstrate by photographing repeated motifs in ancient and Medieval art throughout Europe, that the visual culture of the nomadic Scandinavian “vandals,” usually perceived as mere barbarians, did not derive from southern Europe but in many cases actually inspired European visual forms. Jorn’s conception of “vandalism” retains the double signification of both a historic ethnic group and the general value of destructive tendencies in culture. Jorn writes in *Signs Engraved* that rather than simple destruction, graffiti asserts a common human “need,” that of expression as a fundamental human activity.⁸⁵ He further argues that, because the Medieval church held valuable objects (such as reliquaries) outside of social circulation, anonymous graffiti on the church walls expressed a popular protest against the isolation of artistic objects from everyday life. He thus characterizes graffiti as an art form that defies the institutionalization of art and its removal from common society.⁸⁶ In this sense, the graffiti-like gestures in the “Modifications” demonstrate Jorn’s attempt to radicalize painting in the avant-garde tradition as described by Bürger, of breaking down the separation of art from everyday life. Jorn attempted to remove painting from the isolated sphere of high art and reinsert it into the flux of ordinary life. Rather than simply destroying the prefabricated elements of the “spectacle” (in *Mater Profana*, for example, the clichés of the religious portrait with its conventional pose, holy attributes, and pious upturned eyes), they reframe its outmoded forms. The graffiti gestures react to earlier clichéd expressions in a process perpetually reactivated in our reading of the work: The process is

80. Asger Jorn, *Magi og skønne kunster [Magic and the Fine Arts]* [ca. 1948] (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1971), pp. 17–18.

81. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 259–260.

82. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1991). See also Kristin Ross, “Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview,” *October* 79 (1997):69–83.

83. Pinot Gallizio: *The Laboratory of Writing*, ed. Giorgina Bertolino et al. (Milan: Charta, 2005), p. 117, described in “L’activité de la section italienne,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December, 1958), p. 29. The manifesto is also translated online at <<http://www.notbored.org/guglielmi.html>>. Baj incorrectly attributes the text to Jorn in his description in Baj, “L’imaginaire et le nucléaire” (see note 62), p. 131.

84. “L’activité de la section italienne” (ibid.), p. 29.

85. Jorn, “Sauvagerie, barbarie et civilisation,” in Asger Jorn et al., *Signes gravés sur les églises de l’Eure et du Calvados*, ed. Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism, vol. 2, Bibliothèque d’Alexandrie (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1964), p. 127.

86. Ibid., p. 247.



Figure 8. Gérard Franceschi, photograph of church graffiti printed in *Signes gravés sur les églises de l'Eure et du Calvados* (*Signs Engraved on the Churches of Eure and Calvados*), ed. Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism under the direction of Asger Jorn (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1964), frontispiece. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

evident in the finished work where both “original” and “response” interact. This does not mean that graffiti is any more able to resist recuperation than abstraction, but simply that it signifies an explicitly political opposition made apparent in the “Modifications.”

Rather than declare expression outmoded, the “Modifications” reconceive it as dialectical. Jorn’s conception of painting as the fugitive gesture itself, painting as a verb rather than a noun, rejected notions of authenticity strongly emphasized in the criticism of Informel as well as Abstract Expressionism. Irving Sandler writes of Abstract Expressionism, for example: “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.”⁸⁷

87. Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 97. Sandler also cites statements by Motherwell and De Kooning on the truth and integrity of gesture painting (see pp. 92–96).

Yes, for Jorn the action of the hand was primary, as a way of asserting the physical over the metaphysical or the spectacular, but Jorn’s conception did not ascribe to the gesture any notion of truth, permanence, or special meaning. This difference is crucial. Jorn responded directly to Informel and Abstract Expressionist artists like Pollock or Georges Mathieu who developed the fiction that their practice reached back before the institutionalization of painting: The handprints in Pollock’s drip painting referenced the untrained hand of the cave painter, while Mathieu’s lyrical abstraction played on the notion of an original conception of the sign, wherein in the words of Mathieu “signs precede their signification.”⁸⁸ As one after another, abstract artists declared their intentions to reach the “zero degree” of painting, Jorn’s “Modifications” asserted that there is no zero degree.⁸⁹ The “Modifications” demonstrated that not only was all painting inherently related to art’s institutional history, but that history itself was now public or common, since it required no special training to be an academic painter, only the will to copy.

Jorn actually supported the spread of Sunday painting because it liberated the painting tradition from its own exclusivity. Jorn’s 1959 “Detoured Paintings” text explicitly relates the “Modifications” to an earlier text called “Intimate Banalities,” published in 1941 in the journal *Helhesten* (fig. 9). In it, Jorn declared his “love for sofa painting,”⁹⁰ asserting that the future of art was its past: namely, kitsch. In 1939, Clement Greenberg published his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in New York.⁹¹ Unbeknownst to each other, Greenberg and Jorn would lay out in these key texts major aspects of their theories of modernism and the avant-garde. Jorn’s text asserted that “those wooded lakes in a thousand rooms with yellow-brown wallpaper belong amongst the

88. Georges Mathieu, *De la révolte à la renaissance: Au-delà du Tachisme* [1963] (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 360. Pollock’s handprints can be seen in *Number 1A, 1948*, in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

89. More precisely, Jorn argued that a “point of departure” is necessary, but derived synthetically, in relationship to something else in a momentary situation. Jorn ridiculed Lettrist founder Isidore Isou for proposing a zero point beginning with himself as more of a “religious” system than an “artistic” one. “Originalité et grandeur (sur le système d’Isou),” *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960):28, translated in Asger Jorn, *Open Creation and Its Enemies with Originality and Magnitude (On the System of Isou)*, trans. Fabian Tompsett (London: Unpopular Books, 1994), p. 19.

90. Jorn, “Peinture détournée” (see note 75), p. 142.

91. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch [1939],” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 5–22.



Figure 9. Asger Jorn, pages from “Intime banaliteter (Intimate Banalities),” *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (1941):33–38. © 2007 Artist’s Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

deepest inspirations of art.” The article argued that “the great work of art is a complete banality.”⁹² Perhaps Jorn had in mind Lautréamont’s assertion that “a banal truth contains more genius than the works of Dickens, Gustave Aymard, Victor Hugo, [and] Landelle.” The Situationists drew directly on Lautréamont’s famous assertion, a few lines further in the same text, that “plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in the idea of progress.”⁹³ Lautréamont anticipated Situationist *détournement*, a practice which acknowledged that originality did not mean the creation *ex nihilo* of the abstract painters, but rather an unauthorized reinterpretation of already created works. Jorn’s praise of kitsch in “Intimate Banalities” was equally inspired by Rimbaud, who wrote the famous lines: “I loved idiotic paintings, door panelings, stage sets, backdrops for acrobats, street signs, popular prints, old-fashioned literature, church Latin, erotic books with terrible spelling, the novels of our

grandmothers, fairy tales, little childhood storybooks, old operas, nincompoop refrains, and naïve rhythms.”⁹⁴ Jorn’s embrace of kitsch was part of a long avant-garde lineage celebrating visual creation in all forms regardless of their social value, regardless of their functionality or whether they were created as singular works or in a more “assembly-line” process.

Greenberg, by contrast, defined avant-garde in his 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” as the very negation of kitsch. Greenberg declared that through kitsch the uneducated masses find satisfaction in mass-produced clichés watered down from true modernist or avant-garde art.⁹⁵ For Greenberg, the avant-garde produced work made to satisfy a small intellectual elite tied by “an umbilical cord of gold” to the economic dominance of the bourgeoisie.⁹⁶ Over the next twenty years, Greenberg canonized the first American avant-garde as a formally rather than a politically radical group, a selection of individual innovators “purifying” painting into an authentic literalness, an idea he

92. Asger Jorn, “Intime Banaliteter,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (1941). Translated in *Danish Art 1930–1950*, ed. Per Hovdenakk (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1999), pp. 146–151.

93. Lautréamont, *Maldoror and Poems* [1868–70], trans. Paul Knight (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 274. Debord and Wolman cite Lautréamont in “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” *Les Œuvres nœues* 8 (May 1956), translation by Ken Knabb available online at <<http://www.cdcd.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/usersguide.html>>.

94. Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and Illuminations* [1873], trans. Bertrand Mathieu (Rochester, NY: BOA, 1991), p. 33. Quoted in Andersen (see note 38), p. 87.

95. Greenberg (see note 91), p. 11.

96. *Ibid.*

formulated ultimately in “Modernist Painting” of 1960.⁹⁷ He eventually regarded “avant-garde” as interchangeable with “modernism.” Greenberg’s view developed in the Cold War context of cultural phobia of the revolutionary left, marked by the new liberalism of the “vital center.” In postwar America, everything leftist was understood as “political” and everything else, from center-left to rightist, as merely “liberal.”⁹⁸ Greenberg’s modernist avant-garde in fact returns art to the very apolitical autonomy that the historical avant-garde critiqued according to Peter Bürger’s account.⁹⁹ Jorn’s deliberate conflation of avant-garde and kitsch came out of an entirely different context, and a political viewpoint much closer to Bürger’s. As we have seen, his voice was only one among numerous European art critics and artists who from the late 1940s denounced the institutionalization of abstract art and its transformation from vital expression into cultural capital. Jorn’s defense of kitsch as a potential creative medium took the “high” out of high modernism, at the same time opposing the tendency of kitsch to deaden our own creativity by inundating us with images made by others.

Jorn in fact agreed with Greenberg in his rejection of the idea of mass-produced, easy, naturalistic art—but Jorn, a communist sympathizer who always worked in collective contexts, acknowledged the hold of kitsch on the popular imagination and actively sought ways to transform it into challenging art. In fact, Jorn argued that kitsch, folk art, and high art are terms that only have meaning from the point of view of those who uphold social inequality. He wrote: “The day the aesthetic classification of art ceases to be, the day the moral . . . and the economic classification of people ceases to be, only then will the possibilities of a free, harmonious and universal art be present.”¹⁰⁰ Jorn’s approach makes clear that the separation of avant-garde and kitsch arose from the social valuation not of the artwork itself, but of those who were authorized

to make and exhibit it. The “Modifications” called, as Jorn wrote, for a “devalorization. Only he [*sic*] who is able to devalorize can create new values.”¹⁰¹ They are significant as demonstrations of future actions, and not as valued objects. Jorn originally called the “Modifications” “kitsch” pictures. As Troels Andersen notes, this title recalled a pro-kitsch manifesto produced by the German artists of Gruppe SPUR and cosigned by Jorn in 1958 (a text that itself may have been directly influenced by Jorn’s “Intimate Banalities” essay). The manifesto reads: “Now is the turn of the kitsch generation. WE DEMAND KITSCH, DIRT, PRIMEVAL SLIME, THE DESERT. Art is the dung heap upon which kitsch grows. Kitsch is the daughter of art. The daughter is young and smells good, the mother is an ancient stinking hag. We just want one thing—to disseminate kitsch.”¹⁰² With their typically incendiary language, SPUR explicitly set out to shock postwar Bavarian society with reactionary complacency.¹⁰³ Jorn, however, aimed his satire, with a heavy dose of humor, straight at the art-world establishment, and directed his approval to the forms of creativity it excluded. Jorn embraced a less polemical, more modest and populist conception of kitsch. But like SPUR, he supported popular creativity as impure, cutting across fields of specialization, inherently socially oriented, defying artistic taste, and rejecting individual talent. The central importance of kitsch in the multiple contestations of modernism in the late 1950s cannot be overstated and deserves further investigation, particularly in the European context where kitsch derived directly from the prewar leftist interest in popular art (exemplified by COBRA among others). In postwar Europe, embracing kitsch did not mean eradicating the personal gesture as it came to mean in pop art, precisely because as later critics of pop noted, eliminating all subjectivity meant capitulating to the imposed structure of capitalist mass production.

Jorn began his “Modifications” much earlier than Baj or Spoerri, in the COBRA period. In 1949, he

97. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting [1960],” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

98. Serge Guilbaut, “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the ‘Vital Center,’” *October* 15 (1980):61–78. See also the prefatory description of the decade in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993).

99. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Foreword” in Bürger (see note 25), p. xiv.

100. Jorn, *Magi og skønne kunster* (see note 80), p. 128. Translated in Erik Steffensen, *Asger Jorn, Animator of Oil Painting* (Hellerup: Bløndal, 1995), p. 157.

101. Italics in original. Jorn, “Peinture détournée” (see note 75), p. 142.

102. “Manifesto” signed by H. Prem, H. P. Zimmer, E. Eisch, H. Sturm, L. Fischer, A. Jorn, D. Rempt, G. Britt, and G. Stadler, 1958, translated in *Upheavals, Manifestos, Manifestations: Conceptions in the Arts at the Beginning of the Sixties in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Munich*, ed. Klaus Schrenk (Cologne: DuMont, 1984), p. 181. Cited in Andersen (see note 38), i, vol. 2, p. 83.

103. For a groundbreaking recent account of SPUR in English, see Diedrich Diederichsen, “Persecution and Self-Persecution: The SPUR Group and Its Texts: The Neo-avant-garde in the Province of Postfascism,” *Grey Room* 26 (2007):56–71.



Figure 10. Asger Jorn, *Untitled (Raphael's Angels)*, ca. 1949. Ink on commercial postcard. 9 x 14 cm. Collection Troels Jorn, Copenhagen. © 2007 Artist's Rights Society (ARS), NY/COPY-DAN, Copenhagen.

produced his first series of “Modifications” on art reproductions. These also made use of kitsch, but in this case the reproduction instead of the painted copy (fig. 10). Jorn created these still relatively unknown works then by scribbling in ink on postcards or art-book reproductions of famous artworks. The reproductions included a postcard of the angels at the bottom of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, already in the 1940s the ultimate kitsch image of mass art reproduction. To these images Jorn added schoolboy doodles of glasses, horns, monsters, and other scribbles. In 1950, Jorn wrote to Constant of his idea to create what he called “The Department for the Improvement of Old Canvases,” for which these works were experimental prototypes. He informed Constant that he had already begun with works by Raphael, Manet, Braque, and Dalí.¹⁰⁴ He specified that the function of these works would not be negative like a Surrealist satire, but positive, in order to

104. Only three of these early “Modifications” have turned up: the one using Raphael’s angels and two others on reproductions of portraits by Manet and Renoir. See *Asger Jorn*, ed. Christian Gether et al. (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 2002), cat. nos. 56 and 57, reproduced on p. 121.

preserve the “actuality” of old pictures and save them from oblivion.¹⁰⁵ Jorn referred to his artistic additions as “saletés [dirtyings],” emphasizing their materialist transgression.

The 1949 “Modifications” indicate that the project was not just Situationist but a more fundamental element of Jorn’s practice. These works vandalize the canon of art in the same way that the later paintings attack the metaphysical ideal of painting. Yet they also acknowledge photographic reproduction as the medium that acquaints the masses with art today. They respond directly to the *Museum without Walls* produced by André Malraux, the future French Minister of Culture. First published in 1947, Malraux’s project was a groundbreaking attempt to use photographic reproduction to make visual comparisons of world art available to the masses as a book.¹⁰⁶ The project created just what its title implied, for better and worse: an art

105. Jorn, letter to Constant, 1949–1950, Constant Archives, Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), Den Haag, Netherlands.

106. André Malraux, *Museum without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Francis Price (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

museum in the format of the book in which every work was reduced to the same conceptual level through photographic reproduction. Its liberal-humanist emphasis on aesthetic autonomy, however, was directly criticized by Jorn. Jorn objected to the ennobling and individualist aspects of Malraux's text, in which Malraux describes even anonymous works as products of individual creation, and he contested Malraux's conception of the museum as the appropriate context for art.¹⁰⁷ From Jorn's perspective, Malraux's continued belief in the museum segregated art into an artificial hierarchy of value. Nevertheless, Jorn's numerous book projects attest that he was profoundly affected by the democratizing implications of this project. His early "Modifications" suggest that the mechanical process facilitates our dialogue with past art in an unprecedented manner—but unlike Malraux's project, which approached kitsch in its celebration of anonymous works as individual expressions, Jorn's works "détourn" kitsch by encouraging us to add our own two cents.

Most directly, Jorn's détournement of artistic reproductions recalled Duchamp's 1919 graffiti on the Mona Lisa, with the vulgar title, *L.H.O.O.Q.* Duchamp's gesture similarly defaced a high-art reproduction in order to devalue it, but his methods differed in significant ways. Duchamp created several "palimpsest" works in the 1910s, which predate Jorn's "Modifications" in their use of preexisting artistic or mechanical imagery combined with artistic modification through overpainting or collage. These include Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages*, *Apolinaire Enameled [sic]*, and *Pharmacy*.¹⁰⁸ In *Pharmacy*, Duchamp painted onto three commercial landscape prints barely noticeable red and green forms derived from the shapes of pharmacy bottles. He hand-printed his title and name in capital letters next to the commercial artist's name at the bottom of the picture. Jorn did the same in several of his 1959–1962 "Modifications," except that Jorn signed his name in a more personal script (fig. 2). Jorn's emphatically personal and physical gestures directly contrast Duchamp's attempts to get away from the traditional signature or "patte" of the artist. Duchamp appropriates commercial forms or, in the *Network of Stoppages*, uses chance to create the compositional form itself in order to escape all dictation by the artist's hand.

In *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Duchamp's choice of a famous reproduction demonstrated the outmoded status

of painting as a unique and semi-sacred object, a position Jorn upheld in his initial détournement of the Raphael image, which was also a commercial postcard. Duchamp's gesture, however, was eminently Dada in its total reduction of art-making to a cerebral joke, whereas Jorn's untitled works invoke humor as an artistic response. Jorn's "Modifications" record a subjective encounter with a past work that is both parody and a sympathetic gesture, deliberately childlike and modernist at the same time. Duchamp had executed his readymade in pencil, in a doodle unrelated to modernism or the early phases of children's art. His concept of the readymade itself was a critique of the artist's traditional role as a maker of objects, in favor of a new role for the artist as a collector of objects made by others. Jorn, on the other hand, espoused both making and collecting as creative methods. Jorn's suggestion for a "Department for the Improvement of Old Canvases" implies that unlike Duchamp, he originally had painting in mind, using reproductions at first only for expediency. Duchamp denounced painting in favor of a conceptual approach, avowing that "Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude."¹⁰⁹ He was adamantly against the bodily expression so central to Jorn's practice. While Jorn described his interest in expressing the untrained and uncultured "human animal," crediting Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Kafka for their insights into the animal nature of human beings, Duchamp asserted that "the direction in which art should turn [is] to an intellectual expression, rather than to an animal expression."¹¹⁰ Although directly inspired by Duchamp's famous gesture, Jorn considered art a fundamentally physical expression. He believed in painting's potential to affect the viewer on the physiological level of attraction and repulsion and in its ability to critique or revalue outmoded traditions. As a postwar artist and Situationist, Jorn realized that declaring painting dead could not kill it, and in fact would only surrender it to institutional recuperation. Painting, like every other artistic medium, had to be continually détourned in order to be kept truly alive.

The "Modifications" by Jorn, Baj, and Spoerri suggest a reevaluation of Dada's critique of modernism. Dada had already recognized that the challenge of modernism was neutralized by its isolation from everyday life. What

107. Jorn, "Pour la forme" (see note 14), p. 545.

108. These works and *L.H.O.O.Q.* are reproduced in *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (see note 46), cat. nos. 372, 77, 597, 607.

109. Marcel Duchamp, "The Great Trouble with Art in This Country [1946]," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 125.

110. *Ibid.*, p. 126; Jorn, *Magi og skønne kunster* (see note 80), pp. 128–129, translated in Steffensen (see note 100), pp. 159–162.

changed between Dada and the “Modifications” was that the avant-garde had itself become an institution, fully recuperated into modernism. The “Modifications” reflect a necessarily (because post-Dada) more sophisticated understanding not only that the art world is poised to recuperate even the most radical methods, but also, according to the Situationist perspective, that the power of art-world institutions is deeply enmeshed with the broader structures of economic and political power that control the dissemination of spectacular images. If the Situationists framed Jorn’s works as *détournements*, their observations extend at least in some degree to the works of Baj and Spoerri, which operated on similar aesthetic terms. The “Modifications” reject modernism’s claims to autonomy and originality as absolutely complicit with the power structures of the advertising industry, the mass media, and the national institutions, which promoted Pollock and other abstract artists as the new superstars of expressive freedom, thus alienating the creativity of everyone else. The Situationist International, of which Jorn was an active theoretician, argued for the absolute necessity of continually developing new tactics of avant-garde critique.¹¹¹ But the SI also upheld an avant-garde notion of progress (with themselves at the lead) that was actually equivalent to the modernist notion of originality endorsed by Baj. Only Jorn’s “Modifications” attacked, in both their physical incorporation of painterly dialogue and their institutional framing through manifestoes and writings, any such teleological understanding. Although Spoerri’s project led to a radically different approach to art-making, in its contestation of the reified artistic values of originality and progress, it formed a counterpoint to Jorn’s work. In the postwar period when “avant-garde” became nothing but a signifier of market caché, a true avant-garde project would never call itself one. It would simply act—in the same way that the SI stated at their 1961 conference not that people should stop making art, but rather simply acknowledge that all art (meaning art as a noun, art with a capital “A”) is anti-Situationist.¹¹² The Situationist project is the act of negation; by transforming abstract painting into a graffiti-like response to existing painting, Jorn’s project performed this negation without rejecting painting outright in the iconoclastic vein of Duchamp, Spoerri, or

the later Situationist International. Jorn’s “Modifications” obviously no longer operate with the criticality of their initial deployment in the postwar art world, and this essay may hasten their canonization as artworks. Yet their physical existence continues to suggest, with humor and visceral power, the ongoing development of alternative methods of *détournement*, which is as necessary in today’s spectacular society as it was in 1959.

The “Modifications” reconfigured 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 for the subjective encounter with a devalued popular expression. Interpretations of the “Modifications” as Debordian negations thus ignore not only the contributions of Baj and Spoerri, but also Jorn’s conception of them in the COBRA period and his explicit intentions in the series. Jorn’s works celebrate anonymous creativity, amateur methods, and artistic collaboration across time. Jorn’s view was opposed to the idea of the deliberate advancement of culture that characterized both Greenbergian modernism and Debord’s Situationist approach. Modification exemplified an authentic avant-garde tactic in the postwar period, when the label “avant-garde” itself became unusable because of its automatic recuperation by the institutional discourses of fashion, individualism, modern art, nationalism, and other vested interests. If the historical avant-garde, as Bürger suggests, did indeed introduce self-criticism of the art institution into the meaning of the artwork, the postwar avant-garde developed this criticism into a critique of the ideal of the avant-garde itself. The concept itself was revealed as literally vanity. Jorn’s Duchampian beard added to the face of a girl in a confirmation dress directly inserts his *détournement* into the lineage of the historical avant-garde. His scrawl over the girl’s head makes fun of the avant-garde, but it also asserts with cheerful confidence that every attempt by modernism to recuperate it will be met with new disruptions.

111. “Le tournant obscur,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (Dec. 1958):11, anonymous translation available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/darkturn.html>>.

112. See Attila Kotányi’s comments in “Le cinquième conférence de l’I. S. à Göteborg,” *Internationale situationniste* 7 (April 1962):27, translation by Ken Knabb and Reuben Keehan available online at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/goteborg.html>>.