

MISSIVE GIVING

Greil Marcus on Asger Jorn and Jacqueline de Jong

The Case of the Ascetic Satyr: Snapshots from Eternity, by Asger Jorn and Jacqueline de Jong, with texts by Axel Heil, Karen Kurczynski, Marc Lenot, Roberto Ohrt, and Kevin Repp. New York: JdJ/D.A.P., 2015. 2 volumes, 56 pages, 1 folder, 48 ephemera items.

EVEN THE FORMAL HEADING ABOVE will give you no sense of this book. The definition of a title, never mind the neat totality suggested by an elegant case and a cover painting, won't help solve this case—all punning inevitable. Better to start in the middle, blank, with a fragment, a piece of pinkish-gray paper scavenged from a hotel, an office, a desk drawer, covered in a half-drunken scrawl:

my body is over the ocean
bring back my body to me.
The physical source of love.
laugueovillige

extremely.

the level of love is V love.

in love and out love

lovelevel life is laugh.

beauty is the end of love.

only an ugly can be beautyfull.

an ugly con can-tain beauty.

canned beauty en conserve

[The page is flipped over and the hand keeps writing:]

conserve beauty in cans.

only the con serve beauty

je ne suis pas con

je ne suis pas beauty

[Along the side of the page: EROSENTRIC]

tu aime, donc tu est con.

Descarté

Je t'aime, donc je suis con.

Je suis re-cognaisate.

Je suis un con naisseur confirmé

confesseur en confiture. confit

Je t'aime

I wonder dont t'aime

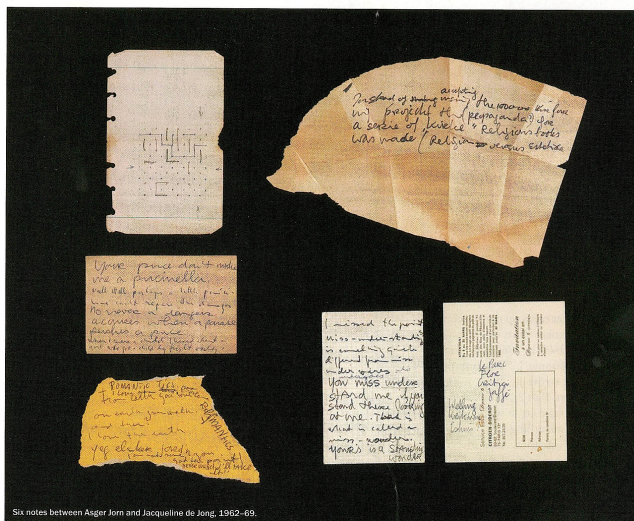
I wonder donc t'aime



From left: Jacqueline de Jong and Asger Jorn, Galerie la Pochade, Paris, January 28, 1966. Jacqueline de Jong, untitled (detail), 1962, woodcut print on paper, 11 1/2 x 9 1/2". From the series "The Case of the Ascetic Satyr," 1962.

What turns up may be commonplace, in the wind of the moment (Jorn was writing sometime in the early or mid-1960s; in 1961, the Beatles made their first record, "My Bonnie"; "The only beauty's ugly, man," Bob Dylan wrote in 1963 in liner notes to *Joan Baez in Concert, Part 2*), banal, irritating, puerile, the tiresomeness of the artist who thinks everything he says must mean something profound. But it's not ego that's writing, it's rhythm. As he goes on, Jorn is more and more attuned to what the words want, one word asking for the next, the lines piling up with a momentum of their own, so that the physical source of writing is as much the author as anyone with a name, and, in moments, as with "conserve beauty in cans. / only the con serve beauty," words begin to break up, and the fragments really do mean so many things, with *con* in English meaning both "swindle" and "against," in French "prick," "cunt," "asshole." For a moment the ego disappears in the flux of words. Words write you.

Jorn was a founder of the avant-garde combine Cobra in 1948, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus in 1953, and the Situationist International in 1957, and with Guy Debord produced the stunning collage book *Vin de Copenhague* (1957) and Debord's all-quotation *Mémoires* (1959). De Jong joined the Situationists in 1960 and soon became a central member. She and Jorn left in 1962, when the group turned against artmaking; de Jong began publishing the *Situationist Times*, a hugely ambitious compendium of aesthetic affinities, while Jorn continued to collaborate with Debord under another name. This is boilerplate, but not quite irrelevant to what's happening in *The Case of the Ascetic Satyr*. The book is a true realization of Situationist ideas about play; the shifting, momentary



Six notes between Asger Jorn and Jacqueline de Jong, 1962–69.

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Even though this is all written by the Danish painter Asger Jorn (1914–1973), it is a dialogue between him and his lover and collaborator Jacqueline de Jong, the Dutch painter born in 1939. They came together in 1959; their affair lasted ten years. Starting in 1962, mostly in Paris, mostly in English, but here and there in French, Danish, Dutch, and German, they fooled around with words.

Look at the passage again. Jorn is talking to de Jong, and he is talking to himself. He is letting the words take him one to the other, by sound and cognate, pun and the

dance of modern language Lewis Carroll caught in three famous lines ("When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all.") Humpty Dumpty is the shadow of the Gestapo here, locking up words like political prisoners; Jorn is Alice, realizing any word might have as many meanings as the number of words in the language he is using.

more than any conventional memoir or roman à clef, the flurry and hurry of the fragments, framed by the formal presence of de Jong's woodcuts, catch the real mood, the ambience, of a love affair: the way it is, spinning from desire into loss, fury into abasement, everything heightened, everything new (*After so long! you say to yourself, has it really been two years, four, six, nine?*), both everyday life and a trance.

It was two people passing notes back and forth in class, with the class the affair itself.

Why do
you always pick up the
pink parts of the painting

de Jong writes, with Jorn answering on the same torn piece of paper,

Because my pick is pink
Show me
Shall I brush your painting
Yes

"I will light my candle in your synagogue," Jorn says to the Jewish de Jong, just after scribbling, in hard, Flair pen lettering, on a gallery card dated December 1966, "I want to fuck you. I do not want to get fucked. I want to be loved. First I fuck you and so I will know if I love you," the *you* a vertical line with a slight hook and the rest of the word a line with a blip, decipherable only from the context. "I missed the point," Jorn says on the back of another gallery card. "Miss-under-stand's is something quite different from miss under wares who undergoes." "You miss under stand me," de Jong cuts in on the page, "if you stand there looking at me," exactly what she should say with him dithering on like that. But they go back and forth in a way that's both as ludic as Jorn's phrasing and as plain as de Jong's. "That is what is called a miss-wonder," Jorn comes in, completing de Jong's line. "Yours is a standing Wonder," de Jong finishes the page. "I am not sure you got the point!" Jorn writes on a little piece of torn yellow paper. "NEVER MIND I'll take it!" de Jong shouts back. They flip the paper over to its gray side and take off. "You asked for it," Jorn writes, in what could be a Crazy Kat speech balloon: "Yourself! No—it not it." "Hit—that's it?" de Jong snaps back. "You! Is my whole Holy to you?" "I think we understand each other," Jorn writes pleasantly, setting up a shoot-out. "I make the Point and you the holy hole," he says. "Gangster-holster!"

Despite Jorn's *vivre sa mort et mourir sa vie* in pencil under other lines in ink on a small piece of note paper ("Do you smoke," de Jong answers on the other side), there is no death in these pages. There is no killing rage. There's a lovely feeling of suspension, less a sense that the story taking shape could go anywhere than that it doesn't need to take a shape at all. "It was a game, it was play," de Jong said in the fall of 2015 in New York, running her hands over the book with pleasure. "It was a potlatch." □

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