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**Situating Jacqueline
de Jong**

*Jacqueline de Jong:
Imaginary Disobedience*

Château Shatto, Los Angeles

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The periphery of the Situationist International is in danger of coming to look more interesting than the main event. Jacqueline de Jong—whose condensed but potent retrospective *Imaginary Disobedience* was on view at the Los Angeles gallery Château Shatto—belonged to the group from around 1960 to 1962, when she was either expelled or resigned (the difference appears to be academic). The nub of the dispute was de Jong's support for her fellow artists in Munich's Gruppe SPUR, the erstwhile German branch of the SI, in defiance of Guy Debord's increasingly stringent anti-aestheticism. Whether the Situationist allegiance matters at all would be a less pressing question if de Jong had not then gone on to publish a magnificently heterogeneous journal, which she dubbed the *Situationist Times*, much to the consternation of Debord and his remaining allies.

The *Situationist Times* ran from 1962 to 1967. It represents de Jong's signal contribution to the avant-garde culture of the decade. Visually speaking, at least, the *Times* has little in common with the sober pages of its rival, Debord's *Internationale Situationniste*. De Jong's journal overflows with a congeries of hand-written text, drawings, and appropriated images. A few recurring motifs—labyrinths or knots, the Situationist concepts of *détournement* and the *dérive*, and a fascination with "primitive" mark-making being some of the most noticeable—provide rough orientation. Yet the published texts have little in common, except the red thread of de Jong's interests. Technical papers on mathematical topology sit cheek-by-jowl with musings on medieval Nordic art by Asger Jorn (de Jong's partner at the time) and the Danish writer Virtus Schade's essay, "Forgotten Knowledge of the Universe in the Children's Hopscotch," to take a few more or less random examples.¹ It need not be derogatory to observe that the *Situationist Times* seems to have been constructed exactly *not* to be coherent.

1. In fact, all three of the aforementioned articles are found in issue no. 5 (1964), which was dedicated to the topic of "rings and chains." For an analysis of topology in *The Situationist Times*, see Karen Kurczynski, "Red Herrings: Eccentric Morphologies in the

Situationist Times," in Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen, eds., *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen: Nebula, and Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2011), 182.

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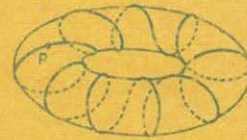
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The fundamental group in this case is a commutative group on two generators: that is, it consists of elements of the form $g_1^s g_2^t$ where g_1 and g_2 are two fixed elements such that $g_1 g_2 = g_2 g_1$, and s and t are positive integers.



The *Times* was absent from de Jong's Château Shatto show, which consisted of paintings and a small number of sculptures bearing dates from 1960 to 2015. Nothing like a straightforward course of development was detectable here. What emerged, instead, was a counterpoint between recurrent preoccupations. De Jong's earliest works—for example, a muddy untitled abstraction (or is it?) from 1962—are close to Jorn's contemporaneous style: excretory streaks of oil deface a raw canvas ground, out of which forms emerge and disappear. The drabness of this painting is unusual, however. De Jong has an instinct for color that tends to primaries modulated with fleshy pinks, bolts of green or purple, and a dry, black line that approximates charcoal. In the most striking instances, the artist opts for a flickering, vital stroke that veers toward the non-representational.

De Jong's idiom is expressionist, in a broad sense. Sex and violence are everywhere. Yet the overall effect is more often playful than lugubrious. The largest work in the show, *De achterkant van het bestaan* (The Backside of Existence) from 1992 is an unframed, double-sided banner; at Château Shatto, it was suspended in the middle of the gallery space, which it cut just about in half. Each side of the work depicts two large forms (one more or less human, the other more or less not) engaged in dubious battle, whilst organisms that could be angels or demons flitter about to the sides. The scene may be one of existential conflict, if not the Apocalypse itself. *Peeing Hamlet* (2012) grafts a few extraneous limbs onto a skeletal figure that holds a skull, presumably Yorick's. The picture is garish, funny, and unsettling all at once, and in its wry attitude towards human embodiment it has something in common with the work of more celebrated painters such as Amy Sillman and Maria Lassnig. *Le Salau et les Salopards* (Bastards and Scumbags, 1966), a three-part construction that resembles a Japanese folding screen, is in turn a veritable panorama of bodies without organs. De Jong uses clearly differentiated colors and textures to separate her figures. Yet they overlap and recombine all the same. Each is possessed of an individual presence yet none resolves into anything so fixed as an identity, and as a result the entire field is riotously alive.

This is a mode that Hal Foster has named "creaturely," with reference to Jorn and his comrades in the postwar CoBrA group.² The word seems useful enough, although in de Jong's case what we see might just as well be an earthy Netherlandish taste for the grotesque, straight out of Hieronymous Bosch or Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In another picture, *Big Foot Small Head (for Thomas)* (1985), an ominous figure stomps on a green dragon. I cannot help reading the aggressor here as de Jong's bad subject par excellence—the (male) human who secures his difference from the beastly by way of crude dominance. I am also reminded of a quotation in Jorn's 1950–51 text, "The Human Animal," which is a short reflection on Kafka: "Why does the

2. Hal Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," *October* 141 (Summer 2012): 4–21. Properly speaking, CoBrA only existed from 1948 to 1951. Its name is derived from the three cities in which its members then resided: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam.



Jacqueline de Jong, *De achterkant van het bestaan* (*The Backside of Existence*), 1992. Oil on sailcloth, 72 × 261 in. Courtesy of Château Shatto. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.



Jacqueline de Jong, *De achterkant van het bestaan* (*The Backside of Existence*), 1992. Oil on sailcloth, 72 x 261 in. Courtesy of Château Shatto. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

dragon,” he asks, “continue to be the holy sign of China and the Orient, while *the dragon killer* has become the most popular symbol of the West, the symbol of the struggle against ‘evil?’”³ For de Jong, too, St. George remains unforgiven.⁴



The chance to see more than half a century’s worth of this underexposed oeuvre in a single space was revelatory, if for no other reason than that de Jong connects the dots between a number of widely separated artistic phenomena. It would be eminently possible, for example, to draw a line from de Jong’s early CoBrA-like works to the resurgence of neo-expressionist painting in the 1980s, perhaps via a detour through her Pop-inflected imagery of the later 1960s and 1970s. (Some of these last pictures are not unlike the contemporaneous output of Gruppe SPUR associate Uwe Lausen, another painter in the Situationist orbit.⁵) *Chambre d’Hotel* and *Rhapsodie en Rousse*, 1980 and 1981, respectively, are film noir pastiches; their resurrection of genre, narrative, and fictive space links them to a kind of postmodern painting that would have just been coming into vogue in cities such as New York and Cologne at that very moment. The point, however, is that de Jong’s career neither seems to have followed such trends, nor ever to have fit very straightforwardly into them.

Emblems of this mobility include the folding suitcase-like paintings (or are they sculptures?) that de Jong made around the turn of the 1970s, in the wake of her breakup with Jorn. These pieces combine quotidian, diary-like texts with unnervingly explicit sexual and violent imagery (my favorite contains a scene of anal penetration, evidently with a wine bottle) and also pinball machines, or “flippers,” as she calls them, an obsession the significance of which is hard to parse. In their goofy comic-book style, these diptychs stand apart from the earlier CoBrA-influenced paintings as well as from the neo-expressionist work of the 1980s and beyond. (The remainder of the 1970s, I should note, was an unexplained gap in the Château Shatto exhibition.) It may be, however, that the “suitcases” are not opposed to the larger paintings so much as they bring to the fore certain attitudes toward sex, animality, and violence that had been latent in her production from the start.

The suitcase works feel very much like a sublation of art into everyday life. This was a broadly avant-gardist ambition at mid-century, as well as a specifically Situationist one. But to observe that the works are quotidian is not quite to say that they are comfortable or sedentary. The fact that the suitcases are built for travel is a reminder not only of de Jong’s precarious position at the close of the 1960s—during which time she was politically engaged but disconnected from Jorn and many of her former comrades, after the cessation of the *Situationist Times*—but also, perhaps, of her childhood as the daughter of Jewish parents in Nazi-occupied Holland, three decades earlier.

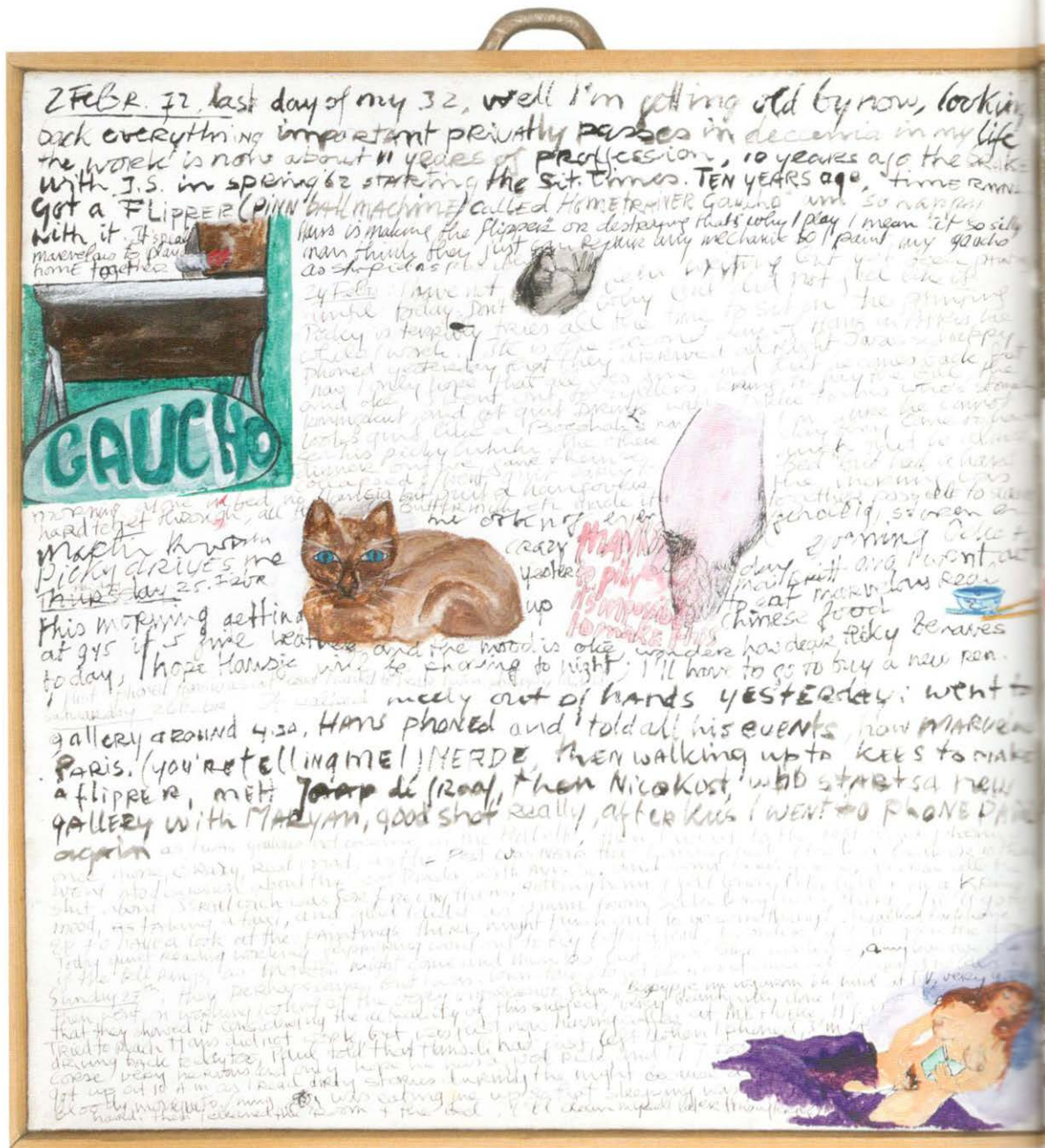
3. Asger Jorn, “The Human Animal,” trans. Niels Henriksen, *October* 141 (Summer 2012), 56, emphasis in the original.

4. Given his blue clothing, the central figure in *Big Foot* might instead be a refraction of the

Archangel Michael in Bruegel’s 1562 *Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the Musée des Beaux Arts, Brussels.

5. Lausen died in 1970. On his work, see the catalog of his 2010 retrospective: Selima

Niggli, Pia Dornacher, and Max Hollein, eds., *Uwe Lausen: Ende schön alles schön* (Bremen, Germany: Hachmann Edition, 2010).



Jacqueline de Jong, *Op het land waar het leven zoet is (In the Countryside Where Life Is Sweet)*, 1972.
Acrylic on canvas, wood, 21½ × 40 × 1 in. (open), 21½ × 20 × 3 in. (closed). Courtesy of Château Shatto.
Photo: Renato Ghiazza.



De Jong and her mother in fact were apprehended while fleeing to Switzerland during World War II, and only survived because members of the French Resistance rescued the pair from the Drancy deportation camp, outside of Paris, and conveyed them to the border. Her father, meanwhile, remained in hiding in Amsterdam. Although she was born in 1939 and thus likely only has inchoate memories of the war, it is reasonable to assume that its impact on her was profound. Her later internationalism—the *Situationist Times* was published in English, and she spent much of the 1950s and 1960s in France and Scandinavia—might be another echo of war-time displacement. (After returning to the Netherlands, de Jong reportedly had to re-learn Dutch, her native tongue.⁶) At Château Shatto, the matter of trauma was present in a recent series about World War I. These pictures are frankly dour. But they are not entirely devoid of the artist's sense of humor. In her uncanny *Horsemen 1918* (2014), for example, both the soldiers and their mounts wear gas masks. One of de Jong's achievements is to have made room for the twentieth century's horrors within a body of work that nonetheless radiates an almost Nietzschean positivity. Or, indeed, a *joie de vivre*.

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To date, art history has had almost nothing to do with de Jong, which is a shame. But this is probably at least in part because her career resists the discipline's systematizing parameters. It may not be necessary to "locate" de Jong at all. She seems comfortable enough following her own path; it just happens that the rest of us have taken a long time catching up. Yet the issue of her place within a broader postwar artistic and political milieu is important, not least because the attempt to answer the question may well change our understanding of that milieu itself. What would it look like to place de Jong at the center of such an (art) history, rather than at its edges?

For starters, it might look a bit like a diagram that de Jong's friends, the artists of Gruppe SPUR, distributed as a flyer in 1960.⁷ At the middle of a loose spiral, which is also a map of Europe, we find SPUR itself. Lines run from here to various allies, such as Asger Jorn in Copenhagen, the artist and architect Constant in Amsterdam, and the painter Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio in Italy, as well as to historical forerunners (Surrealism, Die Brücke, and the Baroque). Jackson Pollock alone makes it across the Atlantic. And there, pushed off towards the upper left, is Guy Debord: just one point in a network. De Jong herself is not in the picture. 1960 was too early, perhaps, for her to have made an impression, and in any case the exclusively male SPUR members, like most bohemian groups of the time, retained a quite traditional chauvinism that has no doubt contributed to her relative obscurity even to the present day. Yet this is very much her world. And to de Jong, at least, it was—and remains—a Situationist world, regardless of formal membership or lack thereof.

6. This detail was reported in Adrian Dannatt, "Undercover Agent," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/jun/07/classicalmusicandopera.artsfeatures>.

7. For the most thorough account of Gruppe SPUR, its successor groups, and its connections to the European avant-garde, see Lauren Graber, *Gruppe SPUR and Gruppe*

GEFLECHT: Art and Dissent in West Germany, 1957–1968, doctoral dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2012.



Jacqueline de Jong, *Big foot small head (for Thomas)*, 1985. From the series *Upstairs-Downstairs*. Oil on canvas, 74 3/4 x 51 1/4 x 1 1/2 in. Courtesy of Château Shatto. Photo: Sara Gerns Bacher.

De Jong's place in this history is uncertain. Even in McKenzie Wark's revisionist 2011 book, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*, which makes a point of rehabilitating artists in the SI orbit—and Jorn in particular—de Jong receives only glancing attention.⁸ Recent writing on the group's forerunners, such as the Lettrist International, as well as its non-French branches (above all the Scandinavian outpost, in which not only Jorn but also his brother, Jørgen Nash, were central figures), has tended to be marked by an impulse to redress Debord's overbearing tendencies, or indeed, by a *hostility* to Debord, which is not quite the proper note either.⁹ A more holistic account need not be a zero-sum game. One way to get closer towards this perspective is to recognize that the Parisian SI was embedded within a larger artistic and political counter-public sphere, within and against which Debord launched his attacks. The word "Situationist" was a battlefield as much as a totem.

In effect, it seems that Debord's alignment with the Situationist label was more contingent than is usually perceived. It was less so than de Jong's, of course, but these are matters of degree rather than kind. In the early stages of his academic reception, Debord seemed the high priest of a church to which he alone held the keys. Now, instead, it has become more evident that he maneuvered in and through the existing networks of the European neo-avant-garde, without which his project would have been dead on arrival. He made use of that avant-garde's techniques. He gathered and directed its energies, for a time, before absconding with the group's name and then transforming its mission into something quite different from what it had been. Which was not necessarily for the worse.

One could phrase it more polemically: there would not have *been* such a thing as "Situationist theory" without Debord; there would only have been a far more diffuse, but not necessarily less interesting, "Situationist movement," of which de Jong was an integral part. The task for historians now is to understand how these two aspects of a definitively non-unitary "Situationism" (an umbrella term, it bears noting, that the Parisian Situationists themselves were careful to avoid) mutually constituted each other—how they interacted and, eventually, diverged. Scholarship over the past decade has come some way towards decentering the latter if not the former manifestation of the phenomenon. In the study of the visual arts, at least, we have become more used to seeing Jorn (if not de Jong—although perhaps that will change) as Debord's equal, rather than his subordinate. The same goes for SPUR, the "Nashists," and all the rest. On their departures, the SI

8. McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

9. This is the case of two important volumes edited by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen: *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing*, cited above, and *Cosmonauts of the Future: Texts from the*

Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere (Copenhagen: Nebula, 2015.) The former contains useful interviews with de Jong, in addition to secondary texts. For another recent interview, see Amy Sherlock, "The Life and Times of Jacqueline de Jong," *Frieze* 186 (April 2017), <https://frieze.com/article/life-and-times-jacqueline-de-jong>.



Jacqueline de Jong. *Horsemen 1918*, 2014. From the series *War*. Oil and ground pumice stone on canvas, 51 × 67½ in. Courtesy of Château Shatto. Photo: Sara Gerns Bacher.

became something much less unruly. Even in the Parisian group, however, tensions persisted long after the expulsions of 1961 and 1962. One has only to read *The Society of the Spectacle* side by side with Raoul Vaneigem's wildly romantic *Revolution of Everyday Life* to see what a high degree of divergence the Situationist trademark could still encompass as late as 1967.

Who, exactly, was on the "right" side, then? Well, Debord, obviously. The let-down here should be palpable, but to say anything else would be dishonest. Of all Situationist artifacts, it is Debord's profoundly Hegelian reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy that remains most crucial to thinking about any root-and-branch opposition to capitalism today. This is true even if the author's achievement would have been impossible without his passage through the movement's "expanded field." And really, fuck art, anyway: another Situationist lesson. Most of what de Jong did falls neatly in line with Debord's concept of recuperation, which is to say, revolt's capture by the apparatus of the aesthetic. De Jong's politics are opaque. But at this late hour, who is left to care? I, for one, find it impossible to begrudge a life well lived. In a better world, there would be no need to choose.

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