

Undercover agent

Painter, publisher, revolutionary and provocateur - Dutch artist Jacqueline de Jong has done it all. By Adrian Dannatt

When Jacqueline de Jong fell into Tracey Emin's tent, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With*, at the opening of Emin's Dutch retrospective, it was an entirely appropriate, if unintentional, homage. For De Jong is one of the 20th century's boldest, most autobiographical female artists. Long before Emin became a controversial figure, De Jong was using art to fight on the revolutionary barricades.

A member of the challenging, radical Situationist International, De Jong seemingly knew or worked with everyone. The retrospective of her work currently at the Cobra Museum, Holland, shows the range of her activities: among an impressive selection of her paintings is a huge collection of magazines and posters, etchings and prints, as well as photographs and ephemera tracing her life through fashion shows, celebrity marriages, bohemian banquets and bank art commissions. Explaining the thinking behind her art, De Jong says: "I love danger. That's why my work is warm, torrid and lively. I don't like the cold simplicity of minimal art. I really like to dig in and work, and have a little fun at the same time."

She was born in the provincial Dutch town of Hengelo in 1939 to a cosmopolitan Jewish family. Her father Hans was a successful stocking manufacturer with a marked taste for art. At the start of the war the De Jong family went into hiding from the Nazis. When they tried to escape to England, they missed their boat - luckily, as it was sunk by a mine. Hans remained in hiding in Amsterdam; Jacqueline and her mother made it to the border of Switzerland, but were caught by French police. While they awaited transportation to the notorious Drancy deportation centre, members of the Resistance took them over the border by foot. When the family returned to Holland, at the end of the war, De Jong had to relearn Dutch.

She tried various careers. She studied drama at the Guildhall in London, and worked at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam's home of modern art, which, in a far more conservative milieu, had a reputation equivalent to that of Tate Modern today. She travelled to Paris to become an apprentice to Christian Dior, just a few weeks before the designer died. Later she returned to Paris to study with the English artist-engraver SW Hayter at his print-making studio.

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It was during her first visit to Paris that De Jong met one of the great loves of her life, the Danish painter Asger Jorn, a founder of the Cobra group. They first met in 1958 when her father bought one of his paintings, and they fleetingly visited his studio together to pick it up. A year later they met again, for lunch in London; that day, Jorn suddenly declared his undying love and proposed immediate marriage. De Jong resisted, but they began a tumultuous, 10-year love affair. The impediments were great: Jorn was 45, married with family; De Jong had just turned 20.

It was during this period that De Jong began seriously pursuing her own art. Though indebted to Jorn, her earlier works have a wonderful ferocity of their own, not least the painting *Mr Homme Attaque Mr Mutant*, a masterful science-fiction bestiary of 1962. It was also through Jorn, an active member, that de Jong met the Situationist International (SI), a revolutionary sect subsequently blamed for everything from the 1968 revolutions to the Sex Pistols.

Founded by the French provocateur Guy Debord, the SI was less certain of its practical programme than its overall aim to ferment agitation and cause trouble to every imaginable organisation through its nihilism. Though ferociously opposed to the surrealists, Debord had the same autocratic taste as André Breton for excluding members of his already small coterie: over the period of the SI's existence, roughly 1957-1972, Debord managed to excommunicate 49 of the 72 members.

De Jong began taking part in SI conferences in 1962. She kept notes, took photographs, translated, sketched, and proposed her own agenda as a member of the central committee. For a while she stayed in Debord's own *chambre de bonne* in Paris; when she became the SI's only Dutch representative, she received a letter

from Debord announcing, " *Ainsi, pour le moment, toute la Hollande est à vous.*" ("Now all of Holland belongs to you.") Inevitably, De Jong herself was ejected from the SI in March 1962, for loyalty to the German section, who believed in the power of the visual arts as opposed to political propaganda. What is remarkable is how consistently and intelligently she stood up against Debord's will, and against this inherently sexist movement.

After being excluded, De Jong refused to join any of the splinter movements but became an independent agent, declaring that others should feel free to become situationists, fulfilling its ideology as they saw fit. Most importantly, she carried on with a plan to create the English-language Situationist Times, becoming editor, designer, publisher, printer and distributor of the movement's most vital and zesty publication. Over six issues, from 1962 to 1967, she brought together elaborate designs, ambitious themes (from labyrinths to rings) and an impressive range of collaborator friends, from Gaston Bachelard and Roberto Matta to Wilfredo Lam and Jacques Prévert.

At the same time as working on the magazine, De Jong organised "happenings" and shows with her avant-garde clan. She was in Paris for May 1968, printing and distributing revolutionary posters - and, smartly, collecting them for the Van Abbemuseum. Two years later, De Jong left Jorn and moved back to Amsterdam with the businessman and gallerist Hans Brinkman; their relationship lasted for a few decades, but ended in divorce a year after their wedding.

De Jong became a regular in the Benelux media: a 1970 TV documentary found her chewing a penis-shaped sandwich. She has created several large installation-paintings for the Nederlandse Bank, made a monumental action painting on stage during a fashion show in 1984, and was official mural artist for the new Amsterdam town hall. These days she and her third husband split their time between Amsterdam and France; she is as committed to vegetable gardening as painting and maintaining her extensive archive of avant-garde movements. But De Jong is still as provocative as ever. As she puts it, in her trademark sexy growl: "My function as an 'undercover' in the arts is to discover and modify all universal experience to my own gusto."