

REVIEWS

Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn's Writings on Art and Architecture, 1938–1958, edited by Ruth Baumeister, translated by Paul Larkin and Ken Knabb

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DIALECTIC OF DIONYSUS

The seemingly self-explanatory category of ‘artists’ writings’ covers a wide variety of practices and has undergone substantial historical transformations. Early twentieth-century modern artists often produced treatises that attempted to legitimize unprecedented forms through plodding attempts at dialectical exposition (Mondrian) or exhortatory symbolist-futurist prose (Malevich). In a step that was to have profound consequences, Duchamp used his notes not for explanation but for exploration, making them into an integral part of his practices. In the 1960s and 1970s, conceptual artists such as Dan Graham and Robert Smithson developed the essay as an artistic form in its own right, using the magazine as a medium. Contemporary artists such as Paul Chan and Hito Steyerl, though they have abandoned the conceptualist impulse to designate texts or ‘magazine pieces’ as artworks, continue to write essays as part of their artistic practice.

The writings of Asger Jorn would seem to be a late example in the Mondrian–Malevich category, evincing a painter’s struggle to position and explain his developing work. But whereas Mondrian used a bowdlerized version of Hegel’s idealist dialectic to legitimize his specific approach as the sole way forward, Jorn performs an idiosyncratic appropriation or *détournement* of dialectical materialism, in conjunction and in dialogue with his art, yet without deriving a set of specific and constrictive formal prescriptions from it. If anything, both the artworks and the essays constitute a

series of experiments that attempt to think through and challenge what Jorn perceives to be the cultural and social status quo, and to give the historical dialectic a decisive jolt.

Born Asger Jørgenson in Jutland in 1914, Jorn made his debut as a painter in Denmark in the early 1930s, where he joined the tiny Communist Party. In 1936 he went to Paris to study with Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier, working with them on the Pavilion des Temps Nouveaux for the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Returning to Copenhagen, he joined the anti-Nazi resistance during the War. In the post-war period, having changed his name, he would be a founder-member of the COBRA group and, in 1957, of the Situationist International. If his primitivist-expressionist visual idiom—combining elements culled from folk art and Munch with the lessons of Surrealist automatism—was entirely at home in COBRA, his continuing production of paintings and artworks in other media (ceramics, collage, sculpture) was accompanied by increasing difficulties with the SI. Jorn-the-theorist was ultimately just as incompatible with the rigours of the Debordian brand of Situationist theory; nonetheless, Jorn's French-language book *Pour la forme*, edited by Debord and published in 1958 by the SI, has long been one of the more readily available and better-known of his publications.

An English translation of *Pour la forme* (as *Concerning Form*) by Jorn scholar Peter Shield has recently been published by the Museum Jorn; Shield is also responsible for a 2002 translation of some of Jorn's writings from the first half of the 1960s as *The Natural Order and Other Texts*—an impressive achievement, though forbiddingly priced. Jorn's early Danish texts have so far gained exposure mostly through Graham Birtwistle's analysis of his immediate post-war writings in *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art between Helhesten and Cobra (1946–1949)*, which takes into account not just the published articles but the substantial unpublished efforts Jorn undertook to present his theory of art and culture in total form. Published in Holland in 1986, Birtwistle's book has not had stellar international distribution, leaving these writings somewhat in limbo. Now the affordable anthology *Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn's Writings on Art and Architecture, 1938–59*, edited by Ruth Baumeister with texts translated by Paul Larkin and others, gives the first overview in English of Jorn's development as a theorist from the pre-war years through the COBRA period to the beginnings of the Situationist International. The publication appears to mark a growing interest in Jorn, which will no doubt be further stimulated by it. Perhaps we have arrived at the moment when Jorn can finally be properly historicized, which is to say: the moment at which his practice becomes visible precisely as being insufficiently 'of its time', as failing to settle into any orderly categorization of mid-twentieth-century art and culture.

Jorn's earliest texts try to formulate conclusions from his experience of working with Le Corbusier and Léger on the 1937 Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, which results in seemingly mutually contradictory titles such as 'On the Artistic Potential Inherent within Architecture' and 'Architecture Is Not an Art'. Jorn is interested here both in collaboration with architects *and* in distinguishing art from architecture. Although the first essay from 1938 is still largely laudatory of Le Corbusier and his colleagues' attempts to reposition visual art and architecture, during the Second World War the texts quickly become critical of modern functionalism, promising or demanding liberation from 'the often deadening conveyor belt of life' through imagination and intuition. For this to happen, architects need to abandon the functionalist paradigm and enter into a genuine dialogue with artists. 'A building that has not been finished off by artists should not be passed for use by the local Health Authority', Jorn writes; but at the same time he does not want to be relegated to the position of 'finisher'.

For the vitalist-materialist Jorn, art springs not from religion but from 'the psychological urge to liberate material substances'—to use and exacerbate their qualities. This root is ultimately the same for art and architecture, but architects have negated the irrational side of art by purging their purist, white constructions of mood, atmosphere, the imagination. The last of these can only return to building projects if artists are involved from the beginning; decorating a scheme previously devised by rationalists will not do. Thus, in his texts from the Second World War, when Jorn was working in relative isolation in Denmark, he laid the ground for his post-war crusade against Max Bill's New Bauhaus in Ulm, and for the formation of the Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste, which would precisely attack the dogma of functionality in the name of the image and the imagination.

Proclaiming that 'art is a life and death issue', Jorn takes his anti-rationalist, anti-functionalist crusade beyond architecture into domains such as fashion, railing against the anti-sensual Anglo-Saxon dress code, which amounts to a 'public castration' and negation of life. Under the stifling 'gentlemanly' ideal, 'the only people who have an acceptable dress code are cinema ushers, artists, bellboys and Christmas elves, and these are all at this stage nothing more than museum curios'. Linked to the 'rigorously policed' modern Western dress code is the 'disgusting, anti-human and destructive surrogate for real life going under the name of gymnastics and sport'. These motifs would be taken up again in the immediate post-war years, when the theoretical and historical scope of Jorn's essays widens dramatically, turning his critique of functionalism into an indictment of classical-rationalist tendencies throughout history.

Functionalism, as the 'ultimate structural expression of capitalism', is only the latest manifestation of the classical tendency that became

predominant when primitive-communist societies were replaced by early-class formations. Classical art is idealist, being predicated on a split between spirit and matter that is the superstructural reflection of the relation between the idle slave-owner and the toiling slave. Against this 'Apollonian' world-view of classical antiquity, Jorn posits the sensual and 'Dionysian' art of life. The Dionysian principle manifested itself most fully in 'so-called communist ur-societies', and later to some extent in the Baroque and in Jugendstil; but it flourishes most fully in Nordic folk art. It is among the more remarkable characteristics of Jorn's thought that the glorification of the 'Nordic' by the hated Nazi occupiers did not in any way deter him from creating a rather static opposition between the Southern/Latin and the Northern/Nordic: 'Thankfully, we are today free of the Germanism that was foisted upon us. But . . . we must not allow ourselves to become bound to Romanism, or indeed a classicist view of life.' While such rhetoric had largely disappeared by the late 1950s, it returned to the fore in the early 60s, when Jorn and his brother Jørgen Nash articulated the reasons for the split in the Situationist International between Debord's Franco-Belgian SI and their Germano-Scandinavian group. Debord turned out to be just another Apollonian southerner.

While there are obviously real and deeply rooted social, cultural and intellectual differences between 'Latin' and other European countries, it is striking how unwilling Jorn is to historicize these, and how eager to essentialize them. He grandly presents his philosophy of art and life as a form of dialectical monism: 'a philosophy that views all material or spiritual entities as double-sided single entities, whilst DUALISM views everything as being divided, a conflict between two elements—the soul and the body, the spiritual and the material, lust and cool reason.' And yet, the dialectical monist spends pages on oppositions that he hardly manages to set into dialectical motion, turning them into mythical dualisms: not only the Nordic and the Latin, but also the male and the female, Yin–Yang, and of course that neo-mythical duality par excellence, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In fact, classicism—i.e. the Apollonian approach—tried to 'expunge from the minds of artists all natural ideas regarding male and female relations', whereas the Dionysian ideal is 'the natural unification of day and night, male and female, activity and passivity, work and rest, Yin and Yang'.

This may seem like proto-New Age prose by a latter-day Nietzschean, but in fact the 1947 essays 'Yin/Yang: the dialectical materialist philosophy of life' and 'Apollo or Dionysus' are part of a far more extensive dialogue with Engels's *Origin of the Family* and *Socialism: Utopian or Scientific*. As Birtwistle argues, Jorn's main bone of contention with Engels's account of the family, from ur-communist promiscuity and matriarchy to proto-capitalist patriarchy, is that it tends to give an aura of historical inevitability to the rise of

patriarchal structures, whereas Jorn chooses to present the latter as a regression imposed on the 'natural' development of society. In the unpublished essay 'Living Culture', he argues that even fairly developed agrarian clan societies could still be called 'primitive communist', and a patriarchal class society only 'arises when an unproductive tribe of hunters, specialized in weaponry, comes to dominate a cultured people and forces them into servile labour'. Jorn is highly critical of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' conception of evolution, which he regards as having unduly influenced Marx and Engels, and seeks to combat any naturalization of historical struggles as 'inevitable'. Class society thus becomes a violent interruption of society rather than a 'progressive' moment in its development.

Jorn seems completely to disregard the crux of Engels's argument (who, unlike Jorn, made extensive use of the anthropology of his day). Just as the emergence of agriculture created patriarchal social structures, so for Engels the development of the relations of production under capitalism means that 'modern individual sex love' is about to explode the bourgeois (patriarchal) family. The rise of the 'pastoral peoples', which for the first time saw a substantial accumulation of property and a gender-based division of labour, had meant that this property had to be passed on to the male descendants working the land and herding the animals; so now, 'with the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society.' One of Engels's main sources was Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Mutterrecht* (1861), which was also a crucial influence on the early Nietzsche, who based his categories of the Dionysian and Apollonian on Bachofen's work. Engels praised the Swiss scholar for identifying the crucial historical transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy, but criticized him for casting it in mythical terms: 'Bachofen believes at least as much as Aeschylus did in the Erinyes, Apollo and Athena; for, at bottom, he believes that the overthrow of mother right by father right was a miracle wrought during the Greek heroic age by these divinities.' Even while criticizing Engels in the name of his own brand of materialism, Jorn ultimately reverse-engineers the former's analysis and ends up with a 'mythical' explanation once again—Bachofen-cum-Nietzsche.

All of this is obviously quite far removed from contemporary preoccupations, and the editor of *Fraternité* might have taken more care to restore some of the context of essays such as 'Apollo or Dionysus'. Yet these rather arcane articles are not devoid of interest. In one striking passage, Jorn contends that:

Dionysian processions, festivals and entertainments lost their true spirit under Apollo's 'rational' hegemony, a spirit whose essence lies in spontaneity, life, fecundity, *movement* . . . love and play, which Apollo changed to homosexual

sporting games and drama, to *tragedy*, to *theatre*—all static media; moving thus from demonstrative art to imaginative art, from reality to illusion.

Two things stand out here. First, Jorn's writings from this period are marked by a tendency to identify homosexuality with the despicable Apollonian—rationalist spirit and its 'anti-sensual disposition', and to condemn it accordingly. Second, by 1947 he had already arrived at an analysis that contained crucial elements of Situationist thinking: the critique of the spectacle and advocacy of a ludic, lived art. In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche had derived a form of media theory from Bachofen, grafting Dionysian and Apollonian categories onto the Wagnerian discourse on the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For Nietzsche, the antique tragedy was the prototypical 'total work of art', because of the way it combined the 'Dionysian' art of orgiastic abandon that is music with the 'Apollonian' visual arts of crystal-clear yet dreamlike perception, with language sharing characteristics of both. For Jorn, the opposition ultimately becomes one between 'static' and 'dynamic' arts—and 'live art' is not itself automatically dynamic.

In a 1954 discussion of the relation between architecture, painting and poetry, Jorn noted that 'it is by conserving the autonomy of these three arts that one finds, within their rivalries, the creative spirit'. However, in his texts from the late 1940s, before debates about medium-specificity and intermediality really became dominant, Jorn had already questioned this 'autonomy of the arts' by stressing the different specific uses to which an artistic medium is put; fundamental aesthetic and ideological conflicts can traverse a seemingly 'single' medium. For Jorn, 'all discussion on the possibility of unifying the arts is simply a waste of time' as long as 'the materialist/synthetic world view' is not accepted as a guiding principle. Ultimately, he sought to re-focus this issue by concentrating once more on the relation between visual art and architecture. Leaving behind his historico-mythological mode of writing for the time being, in the 1950s Jorn's published writings—especially those collected in *Pour la forme*—returned to architecture as 'the culmination of every artistic venture', but with a more developed notion of architecture as a medium for 'creating an ambience and determining a mode of life'.

Locked in functionalist dogma, architecture was in need of interventions by 'the free artist' as a 'professional amateur' who dares to experiment with new forms, with the ugly, with the shock of the new. In order to do so, the artist must engage with the material substrate of his media: for the visual artist, a line is not a mathematical abstraction but a concrete depression etched into paper or drawn in clay. It is used to articulate rhythms; 'we live in *rhythms*', as Jorn already noted in 1949, and 'what's needed here is nothing other than *life*, a living environment, *social living*, a living rhythm of work.' Materials may suggest certain rhythms, which art both exacerbates

and negates in its counter-natural productions. To the end, Jorn privileged crafts and traditional materials over industrial methods and products; to American plastic objects he opposed the stool crafted by a Scandinavian (and presumably Dionysian) peasant, in direct contact with specific substances. In his own work, his appreciation of Debord's films notwithstanding, Jorn remained loyal to materials that could be shaped by hand, especially painting and ceramics.

In one of his more felicitous phrasings, Jorn states that what the bourgeoisie calls chaos is actually life. His writings are certainly full of life, and with their essentialist statements, self-aggrandizing critiques of much more thorough theorists, repetitions and contradictions they form a materialist praxis: rather than reflecting on culture and trying to arrange it in orderly fashion, they engage in the dirty and confusing business of being culture. Jorn briefly refers to Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and a painting from 1958 is named *Verlust der Mitte*, after the 1948 work by art historian Hans Sedlmayr, who had been a member of the Austrian Nazi Party. Where such reactionaries could see only chaos, Jorn saw life—rhythms to modulate. That, in the absence of a living art integrated with architecture, this had to take the form of discrete artistic commodities is a contradiction that Jorn exploited (ensuring a nice income, to bankroll the SI), but never fully articulated or tried to work through. However, the very existence of the SI attested to his conviction that, given the lack of progress during the 1950s with the integration of art and architecture and the realization of such a lived art, the problem needed to be attacked at the root.

Fraternité Avant Tout ends with the 1958 text on 'The Situationists and Automation'—an understandable choice, given the need to keep such a collection manageable, and the fact that many of his most important later essays are available in English online or in Shield's book. However, 'The Situationists and Automation' makes more sense as a text that inaugurates a new period of his theory, dominated by a shambolic but ambitious and massive attempt to forge a post-Marxian theory of value, rather than as the closing item of *Fraternité*. In the 1958 text, he argues that 'the dialectical role of spirit is to steer the possible toward desirable forms', and that automation 'can be rendered progressive only by relating it to new provocations capable of bringing forth the latent energies of man'. Subsequently, in the 1962 book *Value and Economy*, Jorn would argue that automation demonstrated that value cannot come from abstract labour power and standardized labour time, but from 'human ingenuity and imagination', placing art at the forefront of a social and economic development that leads beyond both capitalism and 'actually existing socialism'.

Compared to these writings, whatever one's reservations about their conclusions, many of the concerns and references dominating the essays in

Fraternité now seem archaic. Furthermore, the artist-author often engages with other theorists not through a careful parsing of their arguments, but by mimicking their mode of writing and détourning their phrases, reworking their language just as he reworked flea-market paintings. It is here that the problematical nature of these writings becomes productive, rather than merely symptomatic. Jorn's materialism manifests itself in the way he reworks texts as materials, rather than in a careful deployment of the analytical tools provided by Marxist (or any other) theory. What is dialectical is not so much his reasoning as his treatment of text as a kind of texture. His texts are textiles, and in some ways they find their most perfect expression in what might appear to be a parergon: the illustrations.

While Jorn engaged with nineteenth-century sources as intellectual survivals that appeared more relevant to him than the latest products of thought's evolution (such as Sartre), he was interested in the intellectual life of his day, without necessarily embracing it. As part of a research project on Jorn, Dutch art historian Hilde de Bruijn has posted online a page from his copy of Lévi-Strauss's *Le Cru et le cuit* (1964), which Jorn has deftly annotated with the word 'idiot'. In 1968, Jorn and Noël Arnaud would publish a sardonic visual riposte to what they considered the rationalist and linguistic bias of Lévi-Strauss and of structuralism, with the picture-book *La Langue verte et la cuite, étude gastrophonique sur la marmythologie musiculinaire*, which does to structuralism what the Bauhaus Imaginiste did to functionalism: opposing logical structure with rhythmic form, grids with bricolage, planning with improvisation.

As a montage of images, this weighty parody can be seen as an extension—with a quantitative as well as qualitative leap—of the combinatory exercises Jorn performed to illustrate his earlier articles; Baumeister has thankfully preserved some two hundred of these in *Fraternité Avant Tout*. Often carrying lengthy captions, these assemblages make the montage principle of the texts—which rarely have a traditional, nicely executed linear argument, instead being marked by cuts, leaps and repetitions—even more explicit, condensing it into dialectical visual forms. One combination of rather similar-looking images, for instance, shows 'A smashed window pane and a randomly chosen Danish town' seen from the air. Elsewhere Jorn combines Karl Blossfeldt's plant photos with pictures of minarets, architectural ornaments and totem poles, the movement pattern of a radium atom with the plan of a labyrinth, and sets alongside each other pictures of 'The Naked Ape and the Übermensch' from Nazi propaganda. If the essay 'Apollo or Dionysus' is hard to swallow, a single page in which Jorn uses artworks to develop his take on the Apollonian and Dionysian, and reads the mythological gigantomachy as class struggle, prefiguring Peter Weiss, is nothing short of brilliant. These jump-cuts are not as remote from contemporary viewing

and reading habits as the essays may appear to be; with his montages, Jorn creates rhythms that seem more compatible with them, while still posing fundamental challenges to the viewer/reader—as they should. More than anything, the fact that Jorn's essays are picture essays prevents them from becoming a *monde perdu*—to invoke the title of his 1960 painting, with its title recalling Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, that supremely Anglo-Saxon imperialist vision of atavistic survivals.