



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, 11¼ × 9½". 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 *Fin 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



utopia of the free field; and the replacement of capitalism with potlatch: the replacement of commercial exchange with the exchange of gifts, be they goods, acts, letters, essays, ideas, or conversation, with the motor of the matter that each return gift must outshine the gift that prompted it. It was an aesthetic economy of challenge and dare.

I say the book, but *The Case of the Ascetic Satyr* is a book torn up before it ever became one. In 1962 de Jong produced a set of blazing black-and-white woodcuts in which lines of force danced on the page—if the first work made you think of tree branches, by the last, bodies were beginning to emerge. Jorn wanted them published, but with writing to bring out the sexual explosion in the pieces. So he began to write, and de Jong began to write, sometimes with one or the other interrupting or completing a sentence or a sequence—writing on pieces of paper (often carefully torn to look like detritus, lost notes from nowhere, something picked up on the street by a passerby who read it and then dropped it back on the pavement), restaurant stationery, hotel notepads, business cards, gallery announcements. With few exceptions (lines on an envelope sent to de Jong on September 28, 1967: "I am discovering that I am recovering after having covered a cover girl!"), they aren't dated. Forty-eight of these scraps have been reproduced in exquisite facsimile and are placed, loose, in a folder that contains de Jong's woodcuts on the first and last bound pages. I have no idea if they are arranged in the same order in every copy, but you might as well toss everything into the air and read a different book every time.

Jorn called the project an "erotic novel." As he and de Jong broke up before it was finished—and it would never have been finished—it wasn't published. But far

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-standing'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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