

# Petzel

Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt, "Sale 4 Soul," *Asger Jorn: The Open Hide*, exh. cat. (New York: Petzel, 2016), pp. 11-13.

## Sale 4 Soul

T. J. Clark didn't have to talk about Asger Jorn when he spoke about the social function and historical role of Abstract Expressionism at an art-history conference in Berlin in 1992, back when the city had very recently been on the Cold War front line. In fact, he mentioned Jorn only in passing; but when he did, he called him the "greatest painter of the 1950s." The assertion must have come as something of a surprise to the audience, all the more so because it was made so casually. Even after the talk was published, readers may have suspected that they had missed some key information about the course of history. In the published version of his talk, Clark says this: "In calling Jorn the greatest painter of the 1950s I meant to say nothing about the general health of painting in Europe at the time. On the contrary. The clichés in the books are true. Jorn's really was an endgame."<sup>1</sup>

More than two decades have since passed, and some progress has been made, at least in terms of information. In 1992, the fact that the beginning of Clark's lecture was a reaction to Serge Guilbaut's claims about CIA exploitation of "American Expressionism" was obvious to all but the Germans in the audience. But Clark made no direct reference to Guilbaut's book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, in either the talk or the published article. Jorn's engagement in the Situationist International was an even more difficult subject: in 1992, very few people knew anything about it. Today, there is little argument that this chapter of Jorn's life has a key place in his biography. However, the uniqueness of Jorn's contribution to the SI, and the freedom with which he moved between the various Situationists, have rarely been properly understood. With personal knowledge of Jorn's "significance" in this area, Clark was easily able to play down Guilbaut's reading of Abstract Expressionism, which insisted on the political shortcomings of an entire generation of "great artists." Clark did so as if it were simply a question of painting: "An Asger Jorn can be garish, florid, tasteless, forced, cute, flatulent, overemphatic; it can never be vulgar. It just cannot prevent itself from a tempering and framing of its desperate effects which pulls them back into the realm of painting, ironizes them, declares them done in full knowledge of their emptiness."<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Clark was himself briefly a member of the Situationist International, albeit years after Jorn left the group, is no longer something known only to insiders. This may explain—and we say this with no intention of relativizing—the matter-of-fact way this British-American art historian insisted on the repressed significance of the European artist. All in all, today's circumstances put us in a far better position to judge Clark's statement, although it is highly unlikely that the mainstream, on either side of the Atlantic, is about to accept his judgment. The reasons for this go deeper than missing information or random gaps in the record, or any shortage of obscure special expertise. Clark's judgment points us—whether in New York or Paris, Copenhagen or London—toward the era's decisive omissions and fault lines.

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His "remark in passing" does not address a minor detail: it threatens the very fundamentals of a system of values.

At first glance, it is easy to understand American ignorance of Jorn's work. In the past four decades, Jorn had only a single retrospective in a major New York institution, at the Guggenheim Museum in 1982–83. His last New York solo exhibition was in 1993, at the André Emmerich Gallery. After that, nothing. But things were once very different: the Lefebvre Gallery showed his work for the first time in 1962, and, from 1965 on, acted as his representative in the United States. Up until 1985—the twenty-fifth anniversary of his gallery's founding—John Lefebvre exhibited many works by Jorn: paintings, graphic works, sculptures and drawings, including many never seen in Europe. The gallery also published seven monographic catalogs. By 1967, Jorn's work was already held in the public collections of Berkeley, Boston, Buffalo, Cincinnati, New York, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. After Lefebvre's death, his wife, Lluba, shut the gallery's exhibition spaces, limiting its business to dealing. Jorn's presence in the American public sphere came slowly to an end. But more exhibitions would have done little to alter the broader art-historical context. In terms of painting, the "1950s" belonged to the established greats: Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko. These figures firmly occupied the leading roles, with other Americans filling positions further down the hierarchy. It was more than unlikely that an unknown Dane could call this order into question.

On the other hand, Clark, too, did "manipulate" the facts somewhat: to make his claim, he had to shift the highpoint of Jorn's work to the 1950s. This was the only way he could bring this unknown figure into a context where it could threaten the heavyweights of the system, the value assigned to the Pollock generation. To do this for the 1960s would have required a whole different set of weapons. Anyone familiar with Jorn's painting—and this takes us back to the European side of the question—would surely say it was during the period after 1960 that Jorn made pictures with an intensity, lightness, strength, and grace unequalled by any other artist. In terms of effect, these pictures were puzzling, almost dazzling, but also unbelievably direct, full of stimuli. They encountered and touched the senses with their extreme materiality: "Garish, florid, tasteless, forced, cute, flatulent, overemphatic" was how Clark correctly put it, and his list of inappropriate characteristics hints at the inadequacy of the terms. Individually, they could point only to part of the phenomenon, but listed off, they indicated a knowledge of painting that is thoroughly permeated with "excesses" in every respect.

This development unquestionably begins in the 1950s, in close proximity to the work of Fontana, Burri, and Twombly, but it only reaches its full potential in the 1960s, assuming ever-increasing "force," an element of a passion that in Jorn is always inseparable from a feeling of "weakness," and from an astonishing helplessness. As early as 1964, John Lefebvre pointed to the remarkable coexistence of opposites in

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Jorn: "He prefers to speak about the 'force' that is 'weak' (puissante faiblesse), the 'embrace' which is 'atrocious' (la caresse atroce), the 'presence' which is 'distant' (presence lointaine). These are some titles for paintings which are filled with as much of the electricity his work lives on as the other contradiction called 'plus and minus' which turns motors and gives light."<sup>3</sup>

In Europe, Clark's judgment met—among both simple enthusiasts and trained historians—with a very different kind of astonishment, but here too his deliberate imprecision hit a conceptual nerve: the boundary between the 1950s and the 1960s, the apparently self-evident division that supported widely held ideas about the epochs, in terms of both chronology and content. In the United States, the division between the decades is so clearly laid down in value judgments that to question it can only seem like the stupid joke of a talentless clown. In Europe too, no one would question that Pop art marked the arrival of the fiercest opponent of old-school painting; some observers welcomed artists like Warhol and Lichtenstein as gravediggers of old concepts. But with the Situationists, the contradictions coexisted equally, and even if Debord and Jorn ultimately could not come to agreement, they did remain "friends." To put it another way: the contradictions were at their most developed in Jorn's art, since he preferred oppositions and incommensurability to any kind of simplifying clarification. That was as true for his pictures as it was for his contributions to the Situationists' debates.

It is of course impossible for one small exhibition to move the art-historical status quo; it would be equally futile to try to represent the full breadth of Asger Jorn's work with just a couple of dozen exhibits. Additionally, most of the pictures in the exhibition are of small size. While this is appropriate to the format in which Jorn primarily worked, it is also true that he never let himself be defined by compact dimensions, and certainly never limited his artistic role to them. For an exhaustive overview, a good deal more work would need to be brought to New York—and no doubt this will happen soon. We call this project "Jorn Unknown" and see *The Open Hide* as a first step in this direction. Nevertheless, this exhibition allows Jorn's work from across three decades to be seen, including examples from important series like the "Modifications." We are even able to exhibit pictures that are not only new to New York, but that have gone unseen in Europe for many years. We are especially grateful to Friedrich Petzel for helping us to give Jorn a new opportunity in the United States and to further develop the "Jorn Unknown" project. The future of the past is still unpredictable.

Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt

1 T. J. Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *October* 69 (Summer 1994): 22–48. A German translation was published two years earlier: "Zur Verteidigung des Abstrakten Expressionismus," *Texte zur Kunst* 7 (1992): 43ff.

2 Clark, "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," 37.

3 John Lefebvre, "Asger Jorn," in *Jorn*, exh. cat. (New York: Lefebvre Gallery, 1972), published with a note: "shortened version of an article written and published in 1964."