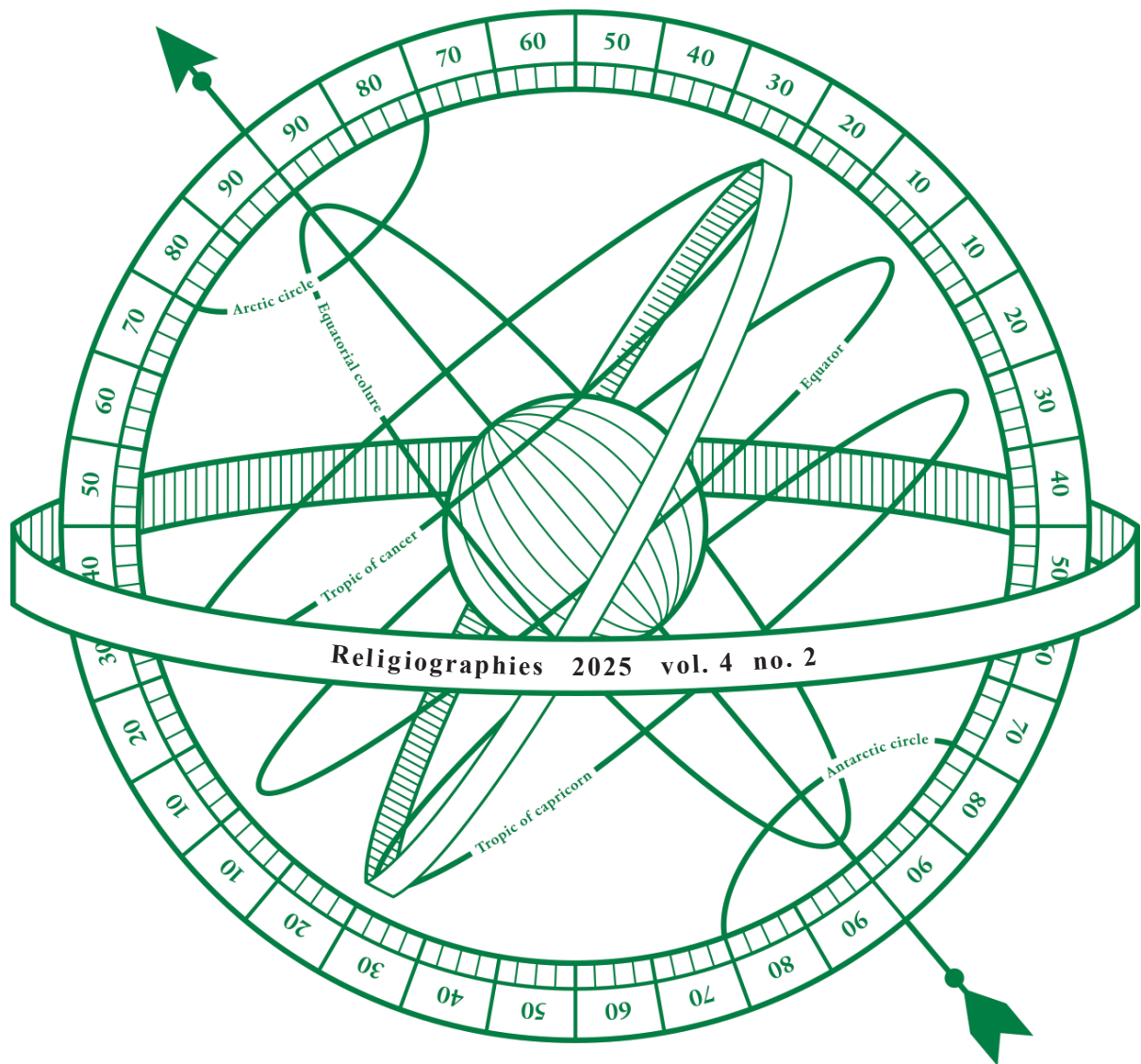


Religiographies



Special Issue
“Occultural Transfers between North and South”
edited by
Giuliano D’Amico

Dividing the Avant-garde: The Circulation of Esotericism among the Situationists¹

PEHR ENGLÉN

Author

Pehr Englén
University of Freiburg
pehr.englen@skandinavistik.uni-freiburg.de

Keywords

Ludic art, Avant-garde networks,
Magic, Sacrality

To cite this

Englén, Pehr. “Dividing the Avant-garde: The Circulation of Esotericism among the Situationists.” *Religiographies* 4, no. 2 (2025): 55–69. <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n2.55-69>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69125/Religio.2025.v4.n2.55-69>

Abstract

For a brief historical moment the Situationist International (SI) united artists across Europe around its elusive but far-reaching aim to construct ludic situations. Launched in 1957, its network fragmented in the early 1960s. In the canonized narrative, which tends to interpret early, multinational SI through the eventual output of its French branch, it splintered because its Parisian core wanted to radicalize the SI message, dismissing the relevance of any purely artistic experimentations and thereby of most non-French members. Paying particular attention to the theoretical sources of inspiration to the SI project, which linked playing to sacrality and magic, this article will suggest another reading. I will argue that the status of such esoteric tropes divided the SI. It separated a Franco-German-Dutch center, which shunned them, from the northern and southern fringes that wished to engage them. I will show how the tropes' local connotations informed such differences and that, upon the network's split, a peripheral situationist grouping emerged that re-appropriated previously suppressed themes and motifs. One ex-situationist, Asger Jorn, even proposed an imaginary geography of their cultural circulation.



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE
fondazione ONLUS
GIORGIO CINI

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International]

To view a copy of this license, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

In his afterword to Asger Jorn's *Le Jardin d'Albisola* (1974), Guy Debord eulogized their time together in the Situationist International (SI). He described his Danish friend as "the permanent heretic of a movement that cannot accept orthodoxy."² His choice of words was curious. For what did the ecclesiastically connoted questions of heresy and orthodoxy have to do with the art movement they co-founded in 1957?

The SI was a network uniting artists across the continent. Its elusive but far-reaching aim to construct ludic situations brought notoriety. It soon made them the most important avant-garde group in Europe.³ At its 1960 peak, the International included branches in Scandinavia and Britain, Benelux and France, West Germany and Italy, and associated chapters in Tel Aviv, Algiers, and Montreal. Shortly thereafter it fragmented. In most retellings of the SI story, which are numerous,⁴ the split is seen as due to a burgeoning divide between an increasingly politicized Parisian group led by Debord, which most often is cast as the true situationists,⁵ and a more artistically inclined network associated with Jorn.⁶

Following Debord's surprising choice of terms to describe Jorn, I will trace the existence of another division within and beyond the International. That divide hinged on questions of sacrality and magic, on whether it was (in)opportune to draw on the esoteric archive. And it separated a Franco-German-Dutch center from its northern and southern hinterlands. While ideas, motifs, and practices associated with esotericism were referenced in the International's geographically peripheral groups, they were dismissed and ridiculed in its core branches.

And yet, as I will show, esoteric expressions were nowhere far from the surface. However hard the core groups tried to banish them altogether, they kept coming back. They were not only unwittingly there from the start; the theoretical inspiration to the SI titular project of constructing situations—Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*—linked playing to ritual and to a sense of magic and the sacred. They were also consciously re-appropriated by the peripheral groups once they had set up a journal and organization of their own. Jorn, in his post-SI project excavating a vanishing trans-national heretical tradition, even proposed an imaginary geography of their cultural circulation.

This article will, in other words, explore two different kinds of occultural transfers. The first such transfer, in which Huizinga's insights circulated, was largely concealed, and once acknowledged, quickly silenced and rejected. This is a transfer whose itinerary can be traced only in hindsight with all the documents at hand. The second such transfer, which encompassed a much larger gallery of esoteric images and thought, took place in full public view. It would have been evident to any reader of the peripheral groups' journal. With reference to Giuliano D'Amico's introductory discussion to this special issue of the different uses of occulture, we could thus distinguish between a first transfer which *allows* for an occultural *interpretation* of the early situationist project and a second transfer which *invites* a *classification* of the later peripheral SI as occultural. As we will see, however, one aspect transcends such distinctions, and that is the underlying sensibility. In situationist hands, magic was always used for ludic ends, the sacred always treated irreverently. With Asger Jorn, we even have a cheeky seeker, pursuing a peculiar occultural path.

1

This article was written as part of the joint Freiburg University and Strasbourg University project "Aesthetics of Protestantism in Scandinavia from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century," funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

2

Guy Debord, "De l'architecture sauvage," in Asger Jorn, *Le Jardin d'Albisola* (Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974), 41. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from languages other than English are mine.

3

Roberto Ohrt, "Fin des modifications: Common and Contested Ground between Asger Jorn and Guy Debord," in *Asger Jorn Restless Rebel*, ed. Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns (Copenhagen: Prestel, 2014), 177.

4

They have been estimated to be the most studied postwar avant-garde group: Raymond Spiteri, "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle," in *Aesthetic Revolutions*, ed. Ales Erjavec (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 208.

5

See for example Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Pimlico, 2002); Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Arles: Editions Denoël, 2001); Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: La révolution au service de la poésie* (Paris: Fayard, 2001); Tom McDonough, *The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945–1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

6

This is not uncontested. For the politics of early, non-French SI, see for example Roberto Ohrt, *Phantom Avant-Garde: Eine Geschichte der Situationistischen Internationale und der modernen Kunst* (München: Galerie van de Loo, 1990); Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011).

From Holland to Italy and Paris: Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and the Emergence of the Situationist International

At first glance, Johan Huizinga seems like an unlikely theoretical source for an artist group with avant-garde pretensions. For while the logic of such pretensions has been described as “an arms race of increased bidding”⁷ which “contests the present as outmoded,”⁸ Huizinga had delved deep into the past. A Dutch cultural historian, Huizinga (1872–1945) had enjoyed a glittering academic career with a string of seminal works on topics ranging from Hindu theatre to medieval (European) culture. Published in 1938, *Homo Ludens: proeve ener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (*Homo Ludens: A Study in the Play-element in Culture*) is his last major work. And in it he did not hold back: he outlined the social function of games during multiple millennia and across the globe. The very first line of the book gives a sense of its scope: “play is older than culture.”⁹

Huizinga did not stop there. Changes of and within civilizations, he argued, materialized through playing. This was so because games, as forms for playing, not only preceded all other social forms. Artistic, martial, political, judicial forms also initially emerged as games. Civilization, he insisted, “does not come from play [. . .] it [rather] arises in and as play.”¹⁰

Beyond good and evil, wisdom and folly, playing, Huizinga suggested, is a free activity, which establishes its own temporality and demarcates its own space. It sets itself off from normal quotidian life; it suspends that life. To show how playing follows its own logic, Huizinga not only drew on examples of playing in everything from board games to carnivals; he also mobilized the etymological roots of the words: *das Spiel* puts a spell on the player, absorbing the players in the illusion of *il-ludere*.¹¹ In that separate logic resides its power.

But if playing, rather than work or war, had historically tended to usher in civilizational changes, that was—due to modern developments—less and less the case. Positioning his ideal-type *homo ludens* against two others, *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*, Huizinga noted that the play impulse had lost ground to other worldviews, as crude materialist philosophies or the reductive behavioralism behind the then “new managerialism.”¹² His book showed what was disappearing with the emergence of a society guided by technocratic, productivist imperatives.¹³

Such claims proved attractive in post-war Paris. Shortly after *Homo Ludens* appeared in French translation, a small group of young marginal artists, who called themselves the Lettrist International, started articulating their project with its help.¹⁴ Led by Guy Debord and his wife Michèle Bernstein, they claimed that what their time period needed was not a higher standard of living, not more bread, but new games.¹⁵ And they claimed they could provide them. In fact, they lived them. They subsumed their art practices under the conceptual umbrella of their playful lifestyle.¹⁶

In their reading, Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* vouched for their importance. The Dutchman's argument seemed to give their bohemian way of life a civilizational importance. Debord, Bernstein, and their group announced: “consciously and collectively, we are working towards establishing a new civilization.”¹⁷ Huizinga's theories allowed

7

Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture: A Sociology of French Theory in the 1960s* (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.

8

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. Malcom DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 91.

9

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1968), 1.

10

Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 173.

11

Huizinga, 38, 11.

12

Thor Rydin, “In the Image of Loss: A New Perspective on the Works of Johan Huizinga (1872–1945),” (PhD diss., Uppsala university, 2022), 217, n. 642.

13

With his book he also rejected other claims advanced at his time of writing (in the late 1930s), such as by a Soviet economism, which banked on material factors, or Carl Schmitt, the so-called Nazi “crown jurist,” whose friend-enemy principle underlined existential struggles between ethnic groups (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 191–92, 209–11).

14

They did so at multiple occasions. See Guy-Ernest Debord, “L'Architecture et le jeu,” *Potlatch: Bulletin mensuelle d'information du groupe français de l'Internationale Lettriste* 20 (30 mai 1955).

15

Michèle Bernstein, André-Frank Conord, Mohamed Dahou, Guy Debord, Jacques Fillon, Gil J. Wolman, “Le Minimum de la Vie,” *Potlatch* 4 (13 juillet 1954).

16

“Soft Drugs,” *Potlatch* 6 (3 août 1954).

17

Potlatch 1 (22 juin 1954).

them to cast their project as a laboratory that linked the micro to the macro level; Huizinga enabled them to connect a fringe group on the Parisian art scene to the roots and on-going formation of (Western) civilization.

Around this time Debord and his friends established contact with Asger Jorn. While they were young and still marginal in Paris, Jorn had already earned some fame and recognition as a painter in groups such as Høst and Linien in Scandinavia and in Cobra, Nuclear art, and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus on the continent. He was an actor in transnational artist networks, living between Scandinavia, Paris, and Italy.¹⁸ He was also a published thinker, participating in a public debate in Denmark and Sweden, where he had established a position as an idiosyncratic critic of functionalist aesthetics and of the instrumental rationality guiding public policy.¹⁹

Like Debord's group, Jorn rejected the standardization of life to which the increased standard of living had led. But while he had a large transnational network and a keen sense of which aesthetic and political developments were threatening the free imagination in post-war Western Europe, he did not have a clearly defined vision of how art practice could form groups and thereby engender social changes. Thanks to Huizinga, Debord and his group did.²⁰

So in the summer of 1957, Jorn organized a meeting in Italy, to which he invited his artist friends from across Europe—and among them was Debord. Jorn had asked Debord to outline his vision of ludic art and its potential. Debord responded with an argument for their need to construct situations.²¹ This piqued the other participants' interest. The two camps, the French and the continental, also needed each other: while belonging to a trans-national network would bolster Debord and his group's claim to importance on the Left Bank, Jorn and his friends were in want of editors in French and interlocutors in Paris, the crucial hub of European intellectual exchange and avant-garde consecration.²² Only there could an art group's claim to change Western civilization as a whole be seen as credible.²³ After a few months of negotiations between the various artist groups about the implications of Debord's keynote address, they united as the Situationist International.²⁴

In the first issue of its journal—published in French and in Paris—the SI did not try hiding Huizinga's influence.²⁵ Ahead of an article on the nascent international's titular project—the construction of situations—the journal ran one on playing. From its framing perspective of history, noting the idealization of production to the detriment of the play impulse, to its last sentences citing *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga's importance is on display. “What one has to see as *the* accomplishment of playing,” they wrote, echoing Huizinga's sense of how the game suspends the normal ordering of the world, “is the very establishment of an ambiance, and the constant increase in intensity and reach of that ambiance.”²⁶ They articulated their own project through his framework: “the work of the situationists is precisely the preparation of future ludic possibilities.”²⁷

Playing is also given a larger, political importance: “its aim must be at least to bring about conditions favorable for living directly. In this sense, it is a struggle and a performance: a struggle for a life made to the measure of desire, and a concrete performance of such a life.”²⁸

18

For studies of Jorn, see Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: En biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1997); Guy Atkins, *Jorn in Scandinavia 1930–1953* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1968); Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn 1954–64: The Crucial Years* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1977); Graham Birtwhistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art Between Helhesten and Cobra* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986); Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The avant-garde won't give up* (London: Ashgate, 2014); Peter Shield, *Comparative Vandalism: Asger Jorn and the Artistic Attitude to Life* (London: Ashgate, 1998).

19

To my knowledge, Jorn's role as a public intellectual in Scandinavia remains to be fully studied. I explored some of it in my dissertation: Pehr Englén, “The Network as Artwork: Asger Jorn and the Situationist International” (PhD diss., Drew University, 2018). I will return to it more in detail in the concluding section.

20

Upon meeting Debord, Jorn did not know of Huizinga (see the second edition of Asger Jorn, *Held og hasard* [Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1963], 61).

21

Debord's contribution was later published as Guy-Ernest Debord, “Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale,” in *Textes et documents situationnistes 1957–1960*, ed. Gérard Berréby (Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004).

22

Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 24.

23

In postwar Europe, Paris was the only city, Tony Judt maintains, “whose obsessions and divisions could both reflect and define the cultural condition of the continent as a whole” (Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* [London: Penguin, 2005], 209.) Debord agreed: in his “Rapport sur la construction des situations,” he argued that Paris trends had a decisive influence in Europe and America (Debord, “Rapport,” 6).

24

I have offered a more detailed account of the negotiations that went into forming the International elsewhere: Pehr Englén, “The Construction of an International: Debord, Jorn, and Situationist Praxis,” *History of European Ideas* 45, no. 6 (2019).

25

Nor does Jorn in hindsight, stating unambiguously that Huizinga was the main influence on the SI: Asger Jorn, “Livet er en drom: Gaston Bachelard og ildens billede,” *Demokraten*, August 20, 1972.

26

“Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu,” *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 10.

In the secondary literature, such a performance of ludic immersion is usually set against the pacifying spectacle of commodity exchange.²⁹ That reading is hard to dispute if one's gaze is predominantly trained on Debord: from his 1957 "Rapport sur la construction des situations" via his SI texts, to his 1967 magnum opus *La Société du spectacle*, a guiding thread is his ever more uncompromising critique of contemporary reification. But if we refrain from positing *La Société du spectacle*—a work that mentions neither playing nor the constructed situation—as the telos of SI theories, and instead try to account for the diversity of opinion in the international's early years, different articulations of ludic art's possibilities come into view.

As I will aim to demonstrate below, placed centrally in such articulations, there are sacred and magical dimensions. In fact, they are at the heart of Huizinga's argument. They were also, however, deemed inopportune in Paris. The French SI branch found them unfit to advance their claim to avant-garde status.

Ludic Construction and Magic Ritual: Paris Positions and Sanctions

Soon after launching as an international, the French SI members positioned the constructed situation and the international network on the Paris art scene. In a then recently published article, Henri Lefebvre had evoked a revolutionary romantic tendency.³⁰ It was based on an *awareness* that, with post-war material progress, a different kind of life was possible. Debord dismissed its applicability to the SI. They would rather *practice* that possibility.³¹

But it was one thing to boastfully declare a coming situationist culture, another to properly situate its mode of emergence. In that same first issue, the SI acknowledged that a constructed situation would not be formed merely by "a unified use of artistic means which contribute to an ambience." Such construction would also have to include "the gestures found on the stage of a moment," gestures at once produced by that setting and by themselves.³² In other words, ludic actions, which could be defined as situationist, would somehow be generated by a dynamic integral to the constructed situation itself; it could not be pre-planned or fully scripted.

That uncertainty dogged the International. A year later, the members cast themselves as "in favour of a certain future of culture and life," but acknowledged that such future "situationist work is a vocation that we are yet to practice."³³ They therefore compared themselves to a research laboratory. To what would its experiments lead? The gist of their project, Debord had asserted already in his response to Lefebvre, "is about producing ourselves."³⁴

In maintaining that the momentary establishment of a unique ludic experience would make them situationists, they (unwittingly or not) drew on the point in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* where he links playing to ritual. "A play-community generally tends to become permanent after the game is over," Huizinga had written, because it involves "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms."³⁵ In doing so, playing, "has all

27

"Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu," 10.

28

"Contribution à une définition situationniste du jeu," 10.

29

See sidenote 5.

30

Henri Lefebvre, "Vers un romantisme révolutionnaire," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 59 (October 1957).

31

Guy Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 20–21.

32

"Problèmes préliminaire à la construction d'une situation," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958): 11.

33

"Le Détournement comme négation et comme prélude," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 10–11.

34

Debord, "Thèses sur la révolution culturelle," 20. Agamben believes that precisely that ambition is what turns the SI into a political movement, Giorgio Agamben, *Le feu et le récit*, trans. Martin Rueff (Paris: Payot & Rivage, 2018), 185.

35

Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 12.

the formal and essential characteristics of [the ritual act] [. . .] [for] it [likewise] transports the participants to another world.”³⁶ Playing, in other words, has a lasting effect insofar as it leads to a new kind of subjectivity. It can do so, even though it is temporary, because it is a liminal practice; that is, it is a practice, which, like rituals of various spiritual kinds, straddles the divide between different orders, between different worlds. That aspect “retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.” And in doing so, Huizinga argued, it “promotes the formation of social groupings.”³⁷

When Huizinga talks of the magic of the game, it is not just a loose metaphor. In doing so, recent scholarship has shown, Huizinga stresses the *intimate* connection between playing and various kinds of religious and spiritual practices.³⁸ Huizinga’s distinction between playing and quotidian normality engaged with other such distinctions being proposed at the time, notably that between the sacred and the profane. In fact, one scholar argues, the former can be mapped onto the latter.³⁹ Huizinga indeed writes that “in the form and function of play [. . .] man’s consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest, and holiest expression.”⁴⁰ Play makes the ritual possible; playing lies at the foundation of the worshippers’ sense, not only of repeating “a cosmic happening,” but to “participate in the sacred happening itself.”⁴¹

That the SI drew on such an argument can be seen as surprising. In its first incarnation, which lasted from 1957 to the early 1960s, the SI predominantly cast their game as a practice with a political meaning.⁴² It was framed as a response to a daily alienation and, in Paris, put in (critical) conversation with the thought of Lefebvre and Lucien Goldmann, as well as the theories presented in journals such as *Arguments* or by groups as *Socialisme ou barbarie*. It was a heterodox Marxist tradition—not a heretical spiritual one—that furnished the horizon of meaning.⁴³

And yet, if we look at the available play theories, we may point to a number of possible reasons for SI’s choosing Huizinga’s. The crucial contender would have been Roger Caillois. While his main work on playing, *Les jeux et les hommes*, was published after the SI had already launched, the 1950 edition of his *L’homme et le sacré* included a new chapter on ludicity and Huizinga. In it, Caillois defined play as diametrically opposed to ritual. But when doing so, he disputed the part of Huizinga’s focus that had made games attractive to the SI—thus enabling the situationists to assert their civilizational importance—namely the focus on playing’s form.⁴⁴

Another, not irrelevant, reason for Huizinga’s attraction is to be found in his background. As he was not French, and thus did not belong to any competing faction on the Paris art scene, he could be made “theirs.”⁴⁵ It was with the foreign Huizinga’s help that an early French-influenced SI articulated an aesthetic vision that demarcated them not only from the Lettrist milieu from which the Parisian situationists sprung, but also from a still dominant Sartrean committed literature and Bretonian Surrealism. If their name could be seen as a cheeky re-appropriation of a key concept of Sartre’s—while turning its meaning inside out: from being something to be unveiled to something to be constructed—it was Surrealism that cast the longest shadow. The

36
Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.

37
Huizinga, 12.

38
Stef Aupers, “Spiritual Play: Encountering the Sacred in *World of Warcraft*,” in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Michiel Lange et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 75.

39
Laurent di Filippo, “Contextualiser les théories du jeu de Johan Huizinga et Roger Caillois,” *Questions de communication* 25 (2014): 290–92. Filippo focuses on a mostly French interwar discussion, featuring Caillois and his *collège de sociologie* with Bataille and Leiris, as well those setting the terms of the discussion, such as, among others, Durkheim and Mauss, Henri Hubert and E. Beneveniste. Already the proto-situationists placed themselves, however ironically, in such a context by naming their journal *Potlatch*.

40
Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 17–18.

41
Huizinga, 15.

42
There were glimpses of exceptions, even among the Francophone members: Gilles Ivan, for example, wrote that “Nous nous ennuyons dans la ville, il n’y a plus de temple du soleil” (*Internationale situationniste* 1 [June 1958]: 15).

43
As noted above, in the scholarship situating the SI in a heterodox marxist conversation, the French branch is usually given a central role, see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (2001) or Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: La révolution au service de la poésie* (2001). An early exception to this rule is Richard Gombin’s *The Radical Tradition: A study in Revolutionary Thought*, trans. Rupert Swyer (London: Methuen Books, 1978).

44
Roger Caillois, *L’Homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 199–213.

45
Here we should note Bakhtin’s theories of the carnivalesque were not yet known in the West. For their arrival in Paris with Julia Kristeva, see Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

first article of the first SI journal addressed Surrealism. “Breton was,” according to one scholar, “the éminence grise of the post-war avant-garde in France.”⁴⁶

But Huizinga would not be “theirs” for very long, and his newfound wider popularity brought into focus the magical aspect of playing. In 1957 Breton had helped publish *L’art magique*. Around the same time, Huizinga’s work caught his attention.⁴⁷ The SI tried to make light of such developments, casting Bretonian Surrealism as one of the invariants of French public life, next to de Gaulle and the Catholic Church.⁴⁸ But there was no denying that they were concerned.⁴⁹ An indulgent attitude to magic and a renewed interest in the esoteric tradition had, by common Parisian art scene consent, made Surrealism lose its avant-garde crown.⁵⁰ Debord did not want to go down this route: there would be no talk of magic.⁵¹

That was easier said than done. Early SI was not a uniform movement with a “party line” dictated from the top. It was more like a discussion forum cohering through disagreements: its journal is in part made up of long renditions of their negotiating about divisive topics. And though some branches were more influential than others—in a way that mirrored how some national intellectual conversations were more influential than others when setting the cultural agenda in Western Europe at large—none could just impose their opinion. This was also the case with the question of magic. As I will demonstrate below, the SI contained members more receptive to esoteric discourses. And they could not just be censored. They could, however, be outmaneuvered. This, I will suggest, is how an SI-core emerged.

From Past Magic to Utopian Futures: A Core Opposes a Periphery

The ludic construction’s links to ancient sacred rituals were far from off-putting to certain crucial SI members, such as Asger Jorn. In fact, that was probably part of what attracted him to the ludic framing of artistic practice; he had recently evoked art’s links to magic. But, as we will see, such links divided the network he had attracted to the International. While resonating in its northern and southern peripheries, such associations found no favor in its continental heartland. And some of those skeptical of esotericism’s applicability would soon speak with one voice, solidifying the network’s geographical division.

To Jorn, what was crucial with aesthetics (or art production) was that it opened a window to the unknown. It did not do so through a contemplation of the cosmos. It did so through action. In *Pour la forme*, which was composed of essays written throughout the mid-1950s, but re-edited and published in French in 1958, Jorn argued that art was a kind of know-how or skill. It was linked to “techniques.”⁵² As such, it differed from modern-day technology, which, Jorn had learned from Jacques Ellul’s *La Technique: l’enjeu de siècle* (1954), was increasingly concerned with measuring.⁵³ It rather kept the links to an older understanding of *technê* alive. It was at once a kind of making and knowing, as is suggested in compound terms shared in German and the Scandinavian languages, such as *smede-kunst* (blacksmithing) or *koge-kunst* (cooking).⁵⁴ “In its original sense,” he concluded, “the word

46

Alastair Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path: Magic and Modernism in Psychogeographical Walking,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, no. 3 (2017): 475.

47

Tessel Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 186.

48

“Suprême levée des défenseurs du surréalisme à Paris et révélation de leur valeur effective,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 33.

49

Bonnett notes that Breton’s “orientation to magic helps explain both the familiarity and the nervousness towards the topic among newer strands of the avant-garde” (Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path,” 475).

50

Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 159–61.

51

Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path,” 476; Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 80.

52

Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ébauche d’une méthodologie des arts* (Paris: Editions Alia, 2001), 27.

53

For the way in which technology had changed the world according to Ellul, see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1967), esp. 323–25. For a commentary on it, see David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1991), esp. 65–70.

54

Asger Jorn, *Held og hasard* (1952; Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1963), 88.

art (*Kunst*) means what we can do, our capacity (*können*) in any given domain” (italics and German in the original).⁵⁵ The fine arts only differed insofar as they had no specific domain; they worked at the limits of domains. Doing so evoked the ability to make “that which cannot be made, that one can do what is considered impossible.”⁵⁶ They redefined what was considered possible. They transcended the existing boundaries.⁵⁷

While he had not read Huizinga before meeting Debord, Jorn was already a keen reader of religious ethnology, particularly of Mircea Eliade,⁵⁸ and in his views of art’s links to *technê* that shines through. Jorn did not pit *homo ludens* against *homo faber*, as had Huizinga, and, implicitly, Debord; like in Eliade’s *Forgerons et alchimistes* (1956), he rather returned to the moment before *homo faber* morphed and technology’s links to *technê* were cut. As we saw above, Jorn evoked a time when art was still connected to artisanal practices.⁵⁹ This was a time when such practices were invested with spiritual meaning, indeed cosmological import. What had originally informed such belief in the extraordinary capacities of artisanal practices was, according to Eliade, the mastery of fire. With its use, natural processes could be accelerated; alchemy was a particularly telling example of a longer development.⁶⁰ For onto the practice of *homo faber* all sorts of magical beliefs with pre-historical roots were projected.⁶¹ Evoked through a different set of semantic associations, such beliefs remained present for Jorn. Like the shoemaker (*skomager*) or watchmaker (*urmager*), the artist, he pointed out, *makes* things. The artist is a “maker of thought, word and imagination.”⁶² But unlike the other kinds of makers, the artist has no prefix. This makes him a (-) *mager*, i.e., a magus. And this gives him *magt* (power).⁶³

Behind such grandiloquent claims lay an etymology that was consciously made up in part.⁶⁴ The semi-flippant discovery of magic is here what Hanegraaff would call a conceptual invention.⁶⁵ With its help, Jorn advocated for the contestatory potential of art. His doing so followed a mold. As some scholars have observed, when evoked by artists aspiring to an avant-garde status, magic comes with a transformative promise.⁶⁶ It is put to discursive work in the service of their claim to spark an aesthetic revolution. Such a perspective spoke to the branches at the International’s southern and northern margins, such as in Italy, where certain members themselves alluded to magic and the cosmological import of situationist practice,⁶⁷ and in Britain, where aesthetic radicalism and magic would soon intertwine.⁶⁸ But it was shunned in the geographically more central branches of the International. As we will see, this was not due to their embracing of an opposing—nationally anchored—definition of magic; it was rather due to the local valence of the ideas, images, and practices associated with Western esotericism, which circulated across (Western) Europe. Such ideas, images, and practices did not connote radical transformation everywhere.

In West Germany, they surely did not. In the article “Homage à C. G. Jung,” a German SI member describes a tram ride. But instead of having stops in their Munich home, it leads to places such as Aurora Consurgens, Ars Chemica, Rosarium Philisophorum, and Hermes Trismegistus. Indeed, the article—peppered with references to the

55
Jorn, *Pour la forme*, 27.

56
Jorn, 27.

57
Because of their connection to the unknown, Jorn would eventually compare artists to shamans (see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 171–72).

58
Many of Eliade’s works are to be found in the extant Jorn library at the Jorn museum in Silkeborg, Denmark. But, as if aware of the fact that Eliade was not an opportune source to cite in all contexts, Jorn, to my knowledge, never did so. Before drawing too many conclusions from this, we should remember that Jorn was not a scholar, and only had a loose relationship to the scholarly apparatus of referencing and citing.

59
Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018), 119.

60
Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*, 145–49, 237–56.

61
Eliade, 235.

62
Jorn, *Held og hasard*, 158.

63
Jorn, 158.

64
It should be noted that the word *magt* (power) cannot be etymologically traced to *mager* (magus). But, as Shield points out, Jorn was “fond of puns, homonyms and homophones, which he felt were the result of resonances in the human unconsciousness” (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 85).

65
Wouter Hanegraaff, “Magic” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 399.

66
Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path,” 473.

67
See Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, “Discours sur la peinture industrielle et sur un art unitaire applicable,” *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 31–35.

68
The Scottish situationist Alexander Trocchi would eventually go on to associate with the Chaos Magick scene and musicians such as Genesis P-Orridge. For Trocchi, see Kasper Opstrup, *The Way Out: Invisible Insurrections in the UK Underground, 1961–1991* (Brooklyn: Minor compositions, 2017). For its occult links, see Christopher

esoteric pantheon and its contemporary interlocutors, such as Eliade, Jung, and other Eranos-affiliated thinkers—spoofed holistic thinking. But beneath the humorous veneer, there was a serious kernel. The German branch was on the run. In Munich their art had been tried for sedition. Like in the spoof, theirs was “a city whose [. . .] titans [. . .] had decided on our destruction.”⁶⁹ The German SI members associated alchemy—and its tropes and motifs—with the local establishment rather than with opposition.⁷⁰ Esoteric discourses were of no use.

Nor, it seems, were they important to the Dutch. After having read *Pour la forme*, Constant, the most prominent Dutch member, frontally attacked Jorn’s aesthetic theory in the second issue of the SI journal. “Industrial and machinal culture is an indisputable fact, and artisanal practices and techniques, including painting [. . .] are doomed,” he proclaimed.⁷¹ Indeed, he goes on with reference to Jorn, “painting [is] linked to a mystical attitude.”⁷² As such it had to be discarded. The SI, he believed, should draw inspiration from future technological possibilities, not past beliefs.

The evidence suggests that the French members shared that opinion. As editors of the journal issue, they did not let Jorn respond to Constant himself. They had a conversation with Jorn, and based on it, a response was formulated.⁷³ From their perspective, this issue clearly had to be handled with care. As if it was not enough to keep at bay Breton’s approach of Huizinga, Jorn’s Eliade-inspired take on the ancient, magical belief in *homo faber*’s ability to remake the world had caught the attention of Estivals, a crucial avant-garde theorist in Paris.⁷⁴ Upon finishing Jorn’s *Pour la forme*, he announced that SI was nearing a rupture.⁷⁵ The new International would not withstand such internal diversity.

To stem the centrifugal tendencies, the French SI members threw in their lot with the Dutch. They substituted the titular project, the construction of a situation, for what had become the Dutch project of a unitary urbanism.⁷⁶ Previously, unitary urbanism had been merely one of all concepts, denoting practices, under the umbrella of the situation, the macro-concept.⁷⁷ That relationship now changed. In Debord and Constant’s jointly signed “Amsterdam declaration,” the situation was subsumed under unitary urbanism.⁷⁸ If the former would establish a temporary ludic ambiance, the latter envisioned something larger and more enduring. Constant and his Dutch colleagues even worked on the blueprints of a new city. Eventually named New Babylon, this city, standing on pillars above an existing urban fabric, would be an experiential jukebox, through labyrinths and other means, where different sectors catered to and amplified different kinds of affects.⁷⁹

The Dutch plans seemed to be spared links to any compromising, pre-historical past. Couched in the future tense, they severed the connection of ends and means in the constructed situation: “Play,” one scholar has noted, “was the whole point of [Constant’s project] but not its mode of production.”⁸⁰ Playing would only take place upon the plans’ completion. The situationist artwork would no longer (magically) produce the situationist artists.

Shortly after, Amsterdam shared Paris’ position as the network’s hub. This was in part due to external factors. In the late 1950s, as the war in Algeria spilled over into metropolitan France, Paris became

Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (London: Routledge, 2014). For the more general case of the British situationists, see Bonnett, “The Enchanted Path.”

69

Dieter Kunzelmann, “Homage à C. G. Jung,” *SPUR* 6 (November 1961): 16.

70

There are clear historical reasons for this. This was an establishment whose complicity with the Nazi regime was a poorly kept secret, least of all from the German SI members, who in various cheeky, if coarse, interventions wanted to bring it out. With this article they are trying something more subtle: in associating esotericism to the post-Nazi city, they reproduce a figure of Frankfurt School thought—of which they were devoted students (McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, 110)—according to which myth, and its scholarly proponents, were linked to fascism: Wouter Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 313.

71

Constant, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 24.

72

Constant, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” 25.

73

Unsigned author, “Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives,” *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 23.

74

An association with Eliade was possibly worse than one with Breton. A Paris resident until recently, Eliade’s fiercely anti-communist stance was hardly a secret, even if his fascist past was less well known. A voracious and eclectic reader, Jorn seemed oblivious, or possibly indifferent, to this; his concern was not positionings in the Paris art world.

75

Guy Debord to Asger Jorn, July 6, 1960 in Guy Debord, *Correspondence: The Foundation of the Situationist International (June 1957–August 1960)*, trans. Stuart Kendall and John McHale [Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009], 367).

76

This concept originated with the Parisians. Constant first heard of it in the first tentative meeting between Jorn’s artistic network, to which Constant as a former Cobra member belonged, and Debord’s lettrist splinter group in summer 1956. Informing his thoughts on art, Constant would become its main proponent, even setting up a separate office for unitary urbanism in Amsterdam. For Constant’s adoption of the concept, see Mark Wigley, *Constant’s New Babylon: The hyper-architecture of desire* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 14–16.

an inhospitable site to many subversive activities, so too to certain SI practices.⁸¹ At the same time, Amsterdam's Stedelijk museum invited SI to mount an exhibition, their first as a group.⁸² Bolstered by French backing, the Dutch led the exhibition planning. Meant to take place in spring 1960 and to feature all the national branches, the exhibition, by including various kinds of media and engaging multiple senses, was to spill out onto the streets, blurring the distinction between in- and outdoor spaces. Its aim was, according to the Dutch, to create "a means of studying and playing with the urban environment [. . .] which would be on the path leading to unitary urbanism."⁸³

Did that finally wash away the traces of ludic construction's connection to sacred rituals? As we will see in the next section, this was not quite the case, neither in this performance nor in the future of the situationists. It would rather inspire the start of an alternative, more esoterically inclined, situationist grouping.

The Labyrinth Goes North: The International Splits and the Esoteric Archive Re-Emerges

Even when led from Amsterdam, the SI had not put the esoteric associations to rest. As its name reveals, "Die Welt als Labyrinth," the exhibition aimed, like Constant's New Babylon, to make the world a labyrinth.⁸⁴ But unlike the Dutchman's plan, that labyrinth was not to be set in the future; it would take place in the present. And that it would do so was seen as momentous: in spite of the Dutch framing, among the other members the exhibition was considered an attempt at constructing a situation.⁸⁵ The members were, in other words, hoping that their labyrinth would engender a situationist subjectivity, a situationist vocation. To invest such hopes in a labyrinth alludes to its ancient function as a site of initiation.⁸⁶ As such—Eliade and other dismissed writers would probably have argued—the labyrinth is hard to detach from spiritual rituals. That was how it had been used a decade prior by Bretonian Surrealism⁸⁷ and how the situationists' exhibition has been interpreted recently.⁸⁸ It is a possibility that even seems to have been shared by Jorn.⁸⁹

Such meanings would soon be actively pursued. Constructing the Amsterdam situation failed. By their own definition, the SI members never fully became situationists. Jorn called the event an "anti-situation."⁹⁰ And as that failure, and its aftermath, became acrimonious rather than ludic, it eventually broke the international apart. Many geographically peripheral members ended up in a new Situationist grouping, which published a rival journal in which the Northern Europeans—the Brits, the Scandinavians, a new set of Dutch artists—were prominent and in which a few Italians and eventually even some Germans took part. Without the need to position themselves in Paris, a whole range of heretical spiritual questions opened up.⁹¹

While the Paris-centered situationists abandoned Huizinga and the labyrinth at this point,⁹² the peripheral situationists continued their interest in these themes. Edited by the new Dutch SI member, Jacqueline de Jong, and published mostly in English—with some texts in French, German, Dutch, and Italian—their journal, *The Situationist Times* (ST), devoted a thematic issue to the labyrinth, featuring articles

77

That the "situation" sat at the apex of SI praxes is illustrated in a 1958 leaflet, "Nouveau Théâtre d'opérations dans la culture," produced by the French SI section (reprinted in *Textes et documents situationnistes 1957–1960*, ed. Gérard Berréby [Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004], 47).

78

Constant and Guy Debord, "La Déclaration d'Amsterdam," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958): 31. For their relation, Debord-Constant, see Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 121.

79

For a description of Constant's long work with New Babylon, see Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*.

80

Mark Wigley, "Paper, Scissors, Blur," in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, ed. Mark Wigley and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 37.

81

Due to racially selective curfews, the Algerian SI member was prohibited from engaging in SI practices (Khatib, *Internationale situationniste* 2 [December 1958]: 18). The police also questioned Debord (Debord, *Correspondence*, 145).

82

Its curator, Willem Sandberg had already exhibited many of the SI artists; Jorn, Constant, and Pinot Gallizio had all mounted shows there.

83

"L'Urbanisme unitaire à la fin des années 50," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959): 14.

84

"Die Welt als Labyrinth," *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960): 5–7; Paula Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths: Strategies of Disruption," *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 7 (2018): 2.

85

Ager Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 (Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark); Guy Debord to Constant, 7 September, 1959 (Debord, *Correspondence*, 279).

86

For this use of the labyrinth, see Joël Thomas, "Labyrinthe: Rome antique," in *Dictionnaire de l'esotérisme*, ed. Jean Servier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013). Debord and his Parisian friends had treated the existing city as a labyrinth in their various psychogeographical experiments, but as Bonnett notes, the description of them was flatly descriptive, shying away from any esoteric flights of fancy (Bonnett, "The Enchanted Path," 476).

87

In its attempt at a postwar launch, Bretonian Surrealism had notably curated a labyrinth as exhibition (Bauduin, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 168.)

by a wide array of interdisciplinary scholars, that explicitly explored the labyrinth's spiritual, mythical angle. In one such instance, a scholar celebrated the ritual practices within labyrinthine spaces, seeing them as part of how "a waking of myth has announced itself in our present day," a search "for a new model of life."⁹³ Similar tunes were sung by the Northern situationists themselves.⁹⁴ In the "Labyrinth Project," the Anglo-Scandinavian artist Gordon Fazakerley acknowledged the Stedelijk museum fiasco, but upheld the relevance of labyrinths. We have, he argued, an existential need for cults. Religions and States have exploited that necessity. His proposal was to fulfill it by bringing labyrinths to the people. As "an anti-bible,"⁹⁵ they would be the basis of a new type of cult.

The peripheral situationists did not stop at the labyrinth. Their journal had thematic issues on interlaces and rings as well. To Jorn, who greatly influenced these issues, such symbols hid a secretly transmitted knowledge of space.⁹⁶ The new situationist grouping wanted to prove their ubiquity across history and culture.⁹⁷ In fact they did not even shy away from reaching beyond history. Interests in a mythic past and in ritual asserted their place next to the old ambitions to establish a different future. These issues showed an interest in trolls (ST 3), tarot cards (ST 4), and cosmogony, alchemy, and demons (ST 5). They ran pieces with references to Eliphas Levi's occultism (ST 5) and to people like Karl Kerényi and Erich M. Neumann, who were associated with the Eranos foundation (ST 4 & 5).

The entire esoteric archive was up for grabs: "We are stealing and borrowing as we feel like," a group of Scandinavians proclaimed. "We are using the heritage." Be it European or African, "we allow ourselves to play with it."⁹⁸

That wish to play around with esoteric lines of thinking is also visible in the journal's layout. The issues feature collages where what has been called an "eccentric archive of divergent images" is on display.⁹⁹ While drawn from different time periods, places, and sources, the images all speak to the journal theme, showing, e.g., interlaces, and interlace-like forms, from the ancient to the modern worlds. In setting such varied images in a historical continuity, the journal lets us follow how these forms have morphed (Fig. 1); these situationists were interested in what Jorn termed "transformative morphologies."¹⁰⁰ The collages can also be seen to associate ancient artefacts with modern-day products or phenomena, even to establish hidden correspondences between them (Fig. 2, 3, 4). In doing so, the collages reference the famous definition of magic, proposed by Tylor and Frazer, as an analogical way of thinking, which confuses similarity with identity.¹⁰¹ But they do so in a facetious way. The display of phenomena's different manifestations through time and across cultures expresses a familiar avant-garde irreverence (Fig. 5 and 6). One such manifestation does not seamlessly lead to another. In their wild linkages, their collage operations rather accentuate the sutures.¹⁰² This is a ludic re-appropriation of "magic."

But is it situationist? These montages grafted esoteric lines of thinking onto prior situationist practices. De Jong, the ST editor, thought of them somewhat surprisingly as *dérives*, the kind of aimless drift through various ambiances that often resembles a stroll in an urban space.¹⁰³ They can equally be said to resemble *détournements*, the

88

"As an anti-monumental architecture, often predicated upon darkness and confusions [. . .] the[ir] labyrinth was the ideal stage on which a kinetic, ritualistic play of the body ensued." Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 5. It was cast, Burleigh goes on, "as a space of temporal collisions [. . .] gesturing simultaneously back to a mythic past and forward to a utopian future" (Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 1).

89

To Jorn the labyrinth needed to be studied topologically (Asger Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 [Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark]). And in an unpublished speech from the subsequent SI meeting, Jorn called topology "the magic of the artist" ("Die Topologie als Magie des Künstlers"). See *SPUR* 2 (November 1960): 20.

90

Asger Jorn to Guy Debord, undated letter, Summer 1960 (Archive of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark).

91

In their manifesto, the Northern Situationists explicitly rejected the need to take positions (Jørgen Nash, Jens Jørgen Thorsen, Gordon Fazakerley, Hardy Strid, Staffan Larsson, Ansgar Elde, Jacqueline de Jong, Patrick O'Brien, "The Struggle for the Situcratic Society: A Situationist Manifesto," in *Cosmonauts of the future: Texts from the Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen (Copenhagen: Nebula, 2015), 92–95.

92

The colonial question demanded attention in France. Mobilizing a vocabulary from the anti-imperialist struggle, Debord now wrote that quotidian life was colonized (Guy Debord, "Perspectives de modifications conscientes dans la vie quotidienne," *Internationale situationniste* 6 [August 1961]: 20–27). There was no space for ludic construction. The stage was set for the argument in *La Société de spectacle*.

93

Hans Jaffé quoted by Burleigh, "Ludic Labyrinths," 5. Unsurprisingly, this was ridiculed by the French branch ("Les Mois les plus longs [février 63–juillet 64]," *Internationale situationniste* 9 [August 1964]: 34).

94

The journal did not, however, advance "a position." It ran articles with contradictory perspectives, and juxtaposed images from different contexts. *The Situationist Times* has thus been interpreted as heteroglossic (Karen Kurczynski, "Red Herring: Eccentric Morphologies in the Situationist Times," in *Expect Anything, Fear Nothing*, ed. Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen [Copenhagen: Nebula, 2011], 136).

95

Gordon Fazakerley, "Labyrinth Project," in *Cosmonauts of the future*, 213.

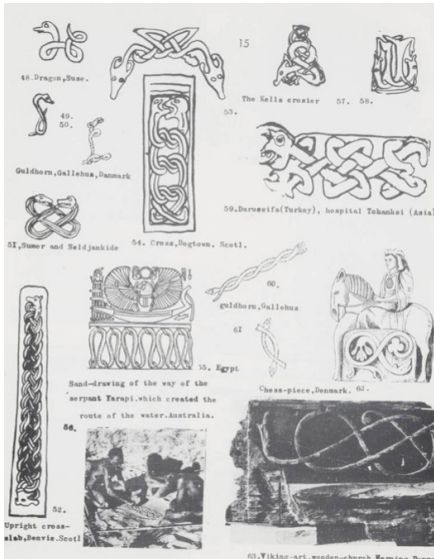


Fig. 1. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 15.

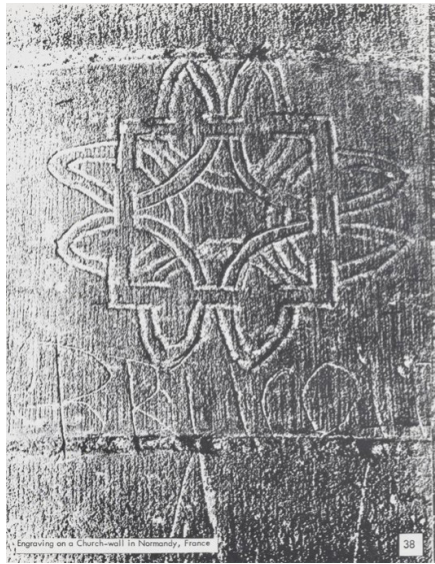


Fig. 2. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 38.

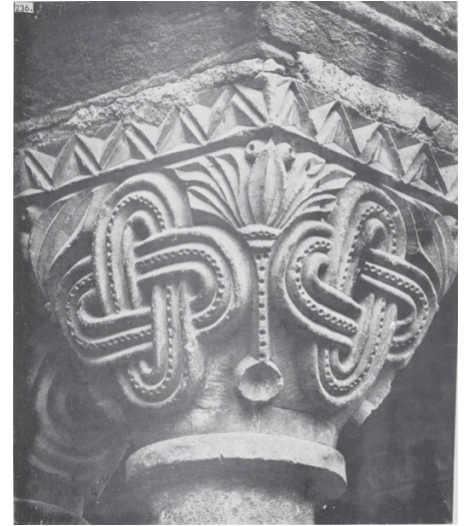


Fig. 3. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 44.



Fig. 4. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 43.

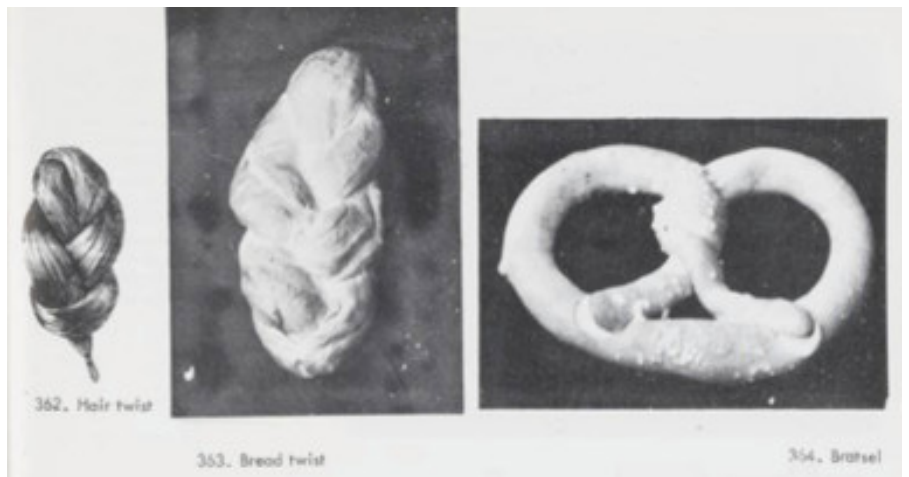


Fig. 5. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 69.

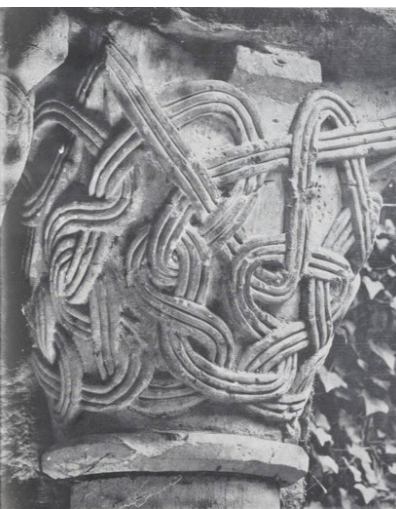
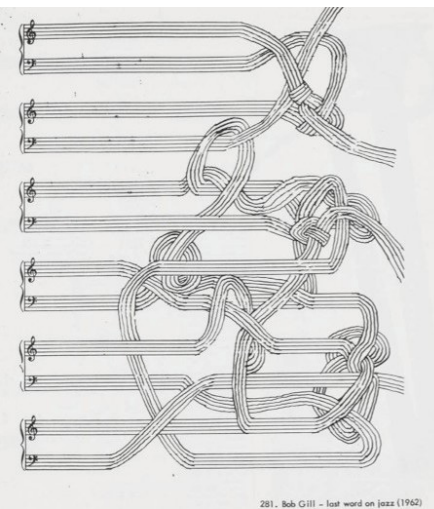


Fig. 6. From *The Situationist Times* 3 (Jan. 1963), 60.

practice that takes an object out of a context and then reinserts it in a new setting to shed new meaning on it. Note, however, that here such practice uses different source materials and addresses a different horizon of meaning than in its more canonized Parisian versions. In the hand of the Parisian post-international SI, *détournement* prefigures a kind of ad-busting, where captions semantically reconfigure what is shown (Fig. 7 and 8). As such, it has been seen as allowing the situationists to “construct a language of negation out of fragments of the dominant discourse, out of the very depths of reification.”¹⁰⁴ As I will show in the concluding section, that aim—if with a different timeframe and another understanding of what and who dominated discourse—could be used to describe the project from which many of these images are drawn: Asger Jorn’s new venture of situationist esotericism.¹⁰⁵



Fig. 7. From *Internationale situationniste* 8 (Jan. 1963), 27.



Fig. 8. From *Internationale situationniste* 6 (Aug. 1961), 10.

Heresy Is Ordinary: The Circulation of Popular Sacrality

Although he officially left the SI in 1961, Asger Jorn remained connected to both situationist groupings. He helped fund their projects and contributed with pseudonymously written articles.¹⁰⁶ But Jorn also had a new project, articulated with a different set of concepts. After leaving the Paris-based Situationists, he no longer called the playful collages *détournements*, but incorporated them in his new interest in vandalism.¹⁰⁷ By that he did not mean that he vandalized these images in the common sense of that term. He rather claimed to trace the imprint of the historical Vandals—and others on the losing side in historiography—on European history. He wanted to turn the conceptual tables on what constituted “culture” by focusing on what had been deemed heretical aesthetic expressions. With some other northern Situationists (like de Jong), he traveled across Europe to document their remnants. Next to labyrinths, knots, and rings, his trips captured various kinds of pagan symbols, monsters, and ancient graffiti.¹⁰⁸ To Jorn, they expressed an unfairly overlooked worldview.¹⁰⁹

96

Asger Jorn, “La Création ouverte et ses ennemis,” *Internationale situationniste* 5 (December 1960): 41. For Jorn’s influence on these three issues of *The Situationist Times*, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 62n12; Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 133.

97

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 2. For their interest in topology, see Kurczynski, “Red Herrings.”

98

Jens Jørgen Thorsen, Jørgen Nash and Hardy Strid, “Co-Ritus Manifesto,” in *Cosmonauts of the future*, 126.

99

Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 139.

100

Kurczynski, 144.

101

Jorn, who had read these early anthropological texts, was very interested in various kinds of analogical and homological thinking, from Swedenborg to Tylor/Frazer (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 52). In fact, in one of his works published around this time, *Naturens orden*—whose title was a reference to the theologian Johannes Scotus Erigena’s work—Jorn, inspired by Swedenborg, aimed to establish correspondences between various distinct domains (Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 52).

102

It thus makes what Wu Ming calls, a good use of esotericism. Wu Ming, “On Making ‘Good Use’ of Esotericism: Notes 2022,” *Religiographies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 116.

103

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 3.

104

McDonough, *The Beautiful Language of my Century*, 8.

105

Kurczynski, “Red Herrings,” 133.

106

He signed as Georg Kellner in *Internationale situationniste* and Patrick O’Brien in *The Situationist Times*.

107

Peter Shield, “Om at laese Jorn,” *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter*, ed. Per Hofman Hansen (Silkeborg, DK: Silkeborgs Kunstmuseum, 1988), 18.

108

Burleigh, “Ludic Labyrinths,” 3.

109

For the way in which symbols and graffiti express a worldview, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 131. For the worldview being unfairly overlooked,

Jorn's new project aimed to raise what we with Cristopher Partridge might call "occultural awareness." It was "concerned with" what Partridge defines as "the conditions within which particular 'lifeworlds' are formed and within which plausibility structures are shaped."¹¹⁰ If the SI had cast itself as the laboratory for the emergence of new such structures—insofar as the ludic situation promised to be the performance of a future beyond instrumentalism, a world ruled by transfigured parameters, a transvalued lifeworld—Jorn now adopted the pose of an occultural archaeologist. Partly inspired by a book series aiming to resuscitate the history of sacred art for the twentieth century, he founded a new institutional structure—Skandinavisk institut for sammenlignende vandalisme (Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism)—with which he aimed to explore the residues of an overlooked but trans-national folk culture.¹¹¹

Jorn believed it urgent to embark on his new project now. As he explained in the five works that gave a theoretical background to the new institution—*Naturens orden* (the order of nature), *Ting og polis* (thing and polis), *Vaerdi og økonomi* (value and economy), *Held og hasard* (fortune and risk), *Alpha og omega* (alpha and omega)—the traces of such lifeworlds were vanishing. The ancient, original life rhythms, to which the objects and artistic expressions in his photos bore witness, were folding under the weight of imposed superstructures.¹¹² The most acute recent threat was the establishment of what would become the European Union.¹¹³ But it was merely one in a long line of institutional impositions.

His perspective was not entirely new. Ever since the end of the war, Jorn had warned about a creeping instrumental rationality's domination of life. While the employed concepts changed, his core idea remained: just as there had been a tension between an aristocratic and a popular culture, an Apollonian and a Dionysian tradition, so there remained one, Jorn believed, between abstract concepts and living rhythms, architecture and festivals, symmetry and dissymmetries.¹¹⁴ Where folk culture constituted a bank of lived memories and habits, "civilization" was merely its elite refusal. The Vandals interested him as rejects in the dominant narrative on Western civilization.¹¹⁵

The Vandals allowed Jorn to imagine an alternative geography of cultural circulation. With them, he sidestepped the hierarchical geography underpinning Debord's original understanding of *Homo Ludens's* potential; he circumvented the belief that an avant-garde project in Paris could, due to the city's continental influence, remake Western civilization as a whole. In his studies, he jettisoned chronology and hierarchies for transversal comparisons. Based on ornaments and symbols rather than architecture and philosophy, he connected the obscure meaning of northern imagery to that of the Middle Eastern arabesque.¹¹⁶ He assumed that, unlike the core cultures once constitutive of the Latin West, in the North as in the Southeast the image preceded the word.¹¹⁷ In the most organically northern institutional superstructure—the *Ting* (thing)—truth and meaning were not written in stone, as per the West's classical tradition; they were written in the sand and had to be sought, like Gnosis.¹¹⁸

Jorn now had a perspective with which to employ the rejected aspect of Huizinga's argument. With his set of oppositions, Jorn situat-

see Asger Jorn, *Ting og polis* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1964), 29–30. For an appreciation of what this meant to conceptions of the North, see Raphaëlle Jamet, "Asger Jorn et l'Institut Scandinave de Vandalisme Comparé: La création d'un boréalisme endogène," *Études germaniques* 2, no. 290 (2018).

110

Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," 118–19.

111

Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 11–12. The source of inspiration for sacred art was the Zodiaque publications in France.

112

Asger Jorn, *Naturens orden* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1962), 131–32.

113

Asger Jorn, *Ting og polis* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1964), 12. To warn Scandinavian readers about its detrimental aspects, he changed from French to Danish.

114

See for example Asger Jorn, "Formspråkets livsnehåll," *Byggmästaren: Tidskrift för arkitektur och byggnadsteknik* 25, no. 18 (1946); "Apollon eller Dionysos," *Byggmästaren* 26, no. 17 (1947); "Poesins väg: Fragment ur en artikel av målaren Asger Jorn," *Byggmästaren* 30, no. 4 (1951).

115

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 8.

116

Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 5.

117

For how this idea drove his new institution, see Dorthe Aagesen & Helle Brøns, "Foreword," in *Asger Jorn Restless Rebel*, ed. Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns (Copenhagen: Prestel, 2014), 29.

118

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 96. For an elaboration of how Jorn connected Scandinavian modes of thinking to Indian modes and to gnoseology, see Shield, *Comparative Vandalism*, 23, and Graham Birtwistle, *Living Art*.

ed the sacred and its aesthetic expressions. They were not confined to any organization or its taxonomies. “Sacred art is always bad art,” he claimed. “Good art,” on the other hand, “is always sacred.”¹¹⁹ The sacred is the crack in the wall of monumental architecture and its underlying hierarchical systematizations. It is “*begejstring*.” As the etymology of its Greek synonym—enthusiasm—suggests, it denotes a transcendental transport. And while the latter may no longer be a “divine transport,” it remains, Jorn insisted, “the transport of the spiritual forces.”¹²⁰

When embracing a heretical sacrality, Jorn could not be accused of approaching Bretonian Surrealism. For while endorsing living myths against ossified instrumental rationalities, sacred art against transparent lines of reasoning, he looked at a “low,” rather than a “high” esotericism.” His sacrality was heretical because popular.

In fact, Jorn in part turned away from Paris to a new set of references. Beyond the likes of Huizinga and Eliade, Jorn now drew on a motley crew of Scandinavian thinkers. Among those cast as precursors allegedly sharing his sensibilities, we find Emanuel Swedenborg and Carl Linneaus, Gustav Fröding and Ivan Aguéli, Søren Kierkegaard and Nikolai Grundtvig. He surely got his stress on popularity from Grundtvig,¹²¹ the communally focused theologian for whom faith’s common prevalence outweighed its conformity to dogma, and the vitality of speech acts overrode the accuracy of textual interpretation.¹²² This was in the reading of Jorn also a theologian who, as shown in his interest in myth, paid less attention to the institutional ruptures and geographical fault lines than formal continuities and trans-cultural similarities in spiritual history. This brought pre-Christian Scandinavian religiosity into conversation with that of Greek antiquity and beyond. His emphases are visible in Jorn’s suggestions.

Jorn briefly even entertained the possibility of giving popular expressions a firmer footing. “‘The art and ability to build a sacred temple’ for people’s creative playing is,” he asserted, “a reasonable programme.” Inspired by Grundtvig’s establishment of popular colleges for general education a century prior, “this temple must be reserved for the public, must become a popular college, must become popular cultural centres.”¹²³ With a basis in an all but lost lifeworld, he again envisioned a laboratory experimenting with ways of making and knowing and thus of living. But this time that would remain merely an idea.

119

Jorn, *Ting og polis*, 179.

120

Jorn, *Naturens orden*, 139.

121

For while there are scattered references to the other thinkers throughout the five works published as part of his comparative institute, *Ting og polis* alone includes an almost 40-page excerpt from Grundtvig’s work on myth: 41–77.

122

Urban Claesson, “Grundtvig, bonderörelse och folkkyrka: En historisk jämförelse mellan Danmark och Sverige,” in *Grundtvig: Nyckeln till det danska?*, ed. Hannes Sanders and Ole Vind (Göteborg: Makadam, 2003), 63–67, 74; Rickard Schönström, “Grundtvig och Geijer: Något om dansk och svensk identitet,” in *Theorier om verklig diktning: Festskrift till Per Erik Ljung*, ed. Birger Hedén et al. (Lund: Absalon, 2008), 27–29.

123

Asger Jorn, *Alpha og omega* (Copenhagen: Borgens forlag, 1980), 124.