

Jens Staubrand: On the author Asger Jorn and his five books from the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism (SICV)

*'I am interested in writing, but without any belief
that I am contributing anything
essential in this field'*
Asger Jorn in *Held og Hasard*

The key to Asger Jorn's authorship is Silkeborg librarian Per Hofman Hansen's *Bibliografi over Asger Jorns skrifter* [Bibliography of Asger Jorn's Writings] (1988), which shows that Asger Jorn wrote throughout his life and that—in this field, as in that of art—he was extremely productive. Seven hundred and twenty-eight numbers make up the bibliography, which includes books, articles, reviews and translations.

We know that things turned out differently, but originally it looked as if Asger Jorn (1914-1973) would have a life lived exclusively in the world of words and books. As son of the couple Maren and Lars Peter Jørgensen, both teachers, it was obvious that 'Agge', as his nickname then was, was going to be bookish. After an unsuccessful attempt to become a student, he got into Vinter's Teacher Training College in Silkeborg in 1930. He passed the teacher's certificate examination in 1935 and received sterling recommendations, highlighting his interest in literature and his teaching ability in Danish. The inter-war period under the Stauning-Munch government (1929-1940) was characterized by economic crises and a glut of teachers, and it was therefore impossible for Jorn to obtain a regular post as a teacher.

During his studies and the period following completion of his teaching exam, Jorn had been interested in art—as a practitioner too. Since the prospects of a teaching post were bleak, the then 22-year-old Jorn resolved to commit himself exclusively to a career as an artist. So he went to Paris in 1936. He wanted to go to painters' school under the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), whose works he had seen reproductions of in art books at Silkeborg Library.

However, in Paris, which he drove to on his BSA motorcycle (reproduced in a lithograph by Heerup in 1936), it turned out that Kandinsky's painters' school had closed down. Instead, he chose the French cubist painter Fernand Léger (1881-1955) and Amadée J. Ozenfant's (1886-1966) free painters' school 'Atelier de l'Art contemporain', which opened in 1924. This was in Rue Moulin Vert and was run under the general management of Léger's wife Nadia Khodossevitich. Apart from Léger and Ozenfant the Russian painter and designer Alexandra Exter (1882-1949) and the French painter Marie Laurencin (1885-1956) taught at the school. Jorn became one of the school's ten pupils and attended for eight months.

During one of his conversations with Léger about surrealism Jorn was introduced to the works of the German-language Czech author Franz Kafka (1883-1924). Léger gave Jorn the novel *The Castle* (1926) and Jorn barricaded himself in his room at the Hotel Comfort, in Rue des Ciseaux, located in the 6th arrondissement near Boulevard Saint Germain, where with great interest he read about the novel's protagonist, the surveyor Josef K.'s emotional and social troubles. Jorn thus gained an insight into Kafka's nightmarish universe, and modern man's fear of and longing for community.

Jorn would subsequently translate, review and write about Kafka. It was Jorn who introduced Kafka to a Danish audience. He did this with translations of the short stories 'The Householder's Concern', 'The Excursion into the Mountains', 'The Bridge' and 'Passers-by', which were printed in *Helhesten*¹ in 1941. In *Helhesten* he also reviewed 'In the Penal Colony' and wrote the article 'Famous Consumptive: Franz Kafka' for the Association of Tuberculosis Sufferers in Denmark. Kafka died of tuberculosis of the larynx. Jorn himself had had tuberculosis (of the lungs) but had beaten the illness, which is partly due to an unhealthy lifestyle and poor housing conditions. Kafka's dark and threatening universe has often been compared with Jorn's work, but Jorn dismisses this in the article 'The Monster', which he wrote as he lay ill with tuberculosis in the Danish Artists' House in the Parisian suburb of Suresnes.

Asger Jorn wrote mostly articles. He would write to magazines and newspapers, on a variety of subjects: from articles on architecture to an article on the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. A couple of his articles will be discussed. One is the feature article in the Danish newspaper Politiken 'The Enigmatic Family', in which Jorn offers his suggestions as to why Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) had the 'peculiar behaviour and attitude' towards women that we encounter in his relationship with Regine Olsen (1822-1904), discussed in Kierkegaard's Posthumous Papers and the semi-biographical tale "Diary of a Seducer" from Kierkegaard's principal work "Either/Or" (1943). Jorn, who himself behaved like a male chauvinist towards women, incidentally, according to the author Elsa Gress, justifies Kierkegaard's attitude towards women on the basis of an erroneous analysis of the family circumstances of Kierkegaard's mother, Ane Sørensdatter Lund (1768-1834). The second article that will be mentioned is the (possibly) important 'Intimate Banalities', which was printed in the journal *Helhesten* in 1941. Jorn was the one who had made up the name of the journal. In Danish, to pace or stamp like a three-legged ghost horse means to kick up a huge racket, and Jorn, who loved being provocative, wished, by highlighting banalities as life-giving subject-matter in the article, to challenge our view of what is ugly and beautiful and acceptable to portray in art. This, and other articles by Jorn in *Helhesten*, including 'The Prophetic Harps', as Graham Birtwistle puts it in 'Living Art. Asger Jorn's comprehensive theory of art between Helhesten and Cobra 1946-1949' (Utrecht, 1986), was fundamental to Jorn's view of art.