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## "STRATEGIC VANDALISM: THE LEGACY OF ASGER JORN'S MODIFICATION PAINTINGS"

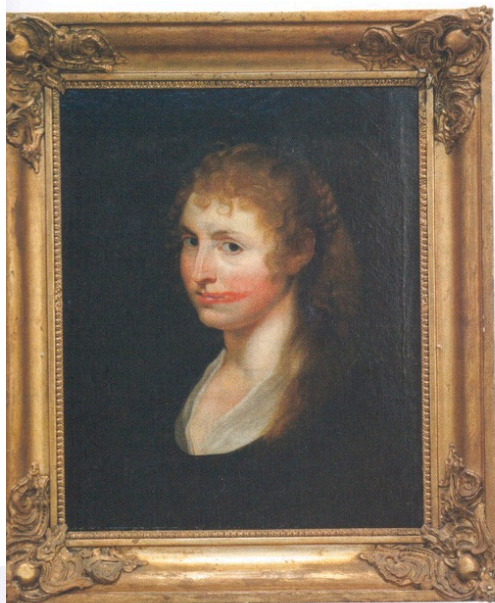
Petzel

In "Strategic Vandalism: The Legacy of Asger Jorn's Modification Paintings," curators Axel Heil and Roberto Ohrt framed Jorn's practice of *détournement* as a kind of ground zero for various strains of appropriation art. *Détournement* is a technique that the Situationist International, which Jorn cofounded with the French theorist and filmmaker Guy Debord and others, developed in the late 1950s and '60s. To *détourn* something is to give it a new context in order to reroute and subvert its meaning. Jorn created his own version of the tactic in his "Modification" series, which comprises paintings he purchased at flea markets and altered with his own irreverent touches. In the most compelling example in the show, *Ainsi on s'Ensor* (*Out of This World—After Ensor*), 1962, he transformed a somber painting of suicide into an especially grotesque scene,

adding a garish mask (an allusion to the work of Symbolist painter James Ensor) to the image of a man who had hanged himself in a dining room.

The Situationists, who sought to oppose what they saw as an increasingly banal, commodified postwar culture, were greatly influenced by Dada. Perhaps that's why, despite the exhibition's premise, the curators included not only works by twenty-four artists that were made after Jorn's "Modifications" but also three earlier pieces by Dada heavyweights: Marcel Duchamp's infamous *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919/1964), a *Mona Lisa* postcard disfigured with a mustache and goatee; Francis Picabia's *Bière Sarrator* (ca. 1925), a beer advertisement he signed as his own; and Max Ernst's *Untitled—Le feu* (1934), a collage on an engraving depicting medieval torture. In addition, a number of later works in the show—such as Ray Johnson's *Untitled (Mona Lisa Bunny)*, 1984, which updates Duchamp's vandalism with Johnson's signature bunny motif, and Martin Kippenberger's *Modell Interconti* (1987), an assisted readymade that turns a 1973 Gerhard Richter painting into a table—were clear descendants of Dada. Thus, Dada cast a long shadow over the exhibition, complicating the argument about Jorn's influence.

That influence was most direct in the defacements by Jim Shaw, Enrico Baj, and Alexis Smith of found paintings. Like Jorn, these artists offered an assault on distinctions of taste while treating the adapted sources as wellsprings of latent meaning. Shaw's *The Old Masturbator and the Far Away Hills* (2019) is a satirical appropriation of a bucolic scene. White smoke billows from the chimney of a wooden house by a river in a verdant valley, forming an image of Ronald Reagan smoking a cigarette and blowing smoke up the ass of a partially visible nude in the painting's upper right corner.



Several works *détourned* more properly art historical sources, including Betty Tompkins's feminist "Women Words" paintings (2017–18), in which she painted the bodies of women in textbook reproductions of artworks—such as Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647)—with text derived from a list of words and phrases, many of them sexist, used to describe women. Other artists mined their own oeuvres. In two large-scale painting-collages (*Present Subjunctive* and *Past Conditional*, both 1976), Lee Krasner demonstrated a brilliant, unexpected application of *détournement* by recycling one of her paintings. She cut up the work, which featured gray and white washes of paint overlaid with expressive black figural outlines, and rearranged its pieces into abstract geometric compositions on unprimed linen.

Given the political aims of Jorn and the Situationists, the show's omission of artists who have used *détournement* for more explicitly political purposes—Sherrie Levine, Gran Fury, Tania Bruguera, and Lorna Simpson, to name only a few—was unfortunate. Further, in an age in which memes and remix culture predominate, the emphasis on Jorn's influence on contemporary painting risks narrowing his work's significance rather than extending its currency. That said, "Strategic Vandalism" successfully limned the power of *détournement* as a means of shattering social and cultural conventions—of fulfilling the Situationist desire to "organize the detonation."

—Jane Ursula Harris

Hans-Peter Feldmann: *Woman with Lipstick*, undated, oil on canvas with frame, 29 by 24¾ inches; in "Strategic Vandalism: The Legacy of Asger Jorn's Modification Paintings."