



JUBILEE – platform for artistic research and production

*Photo credits cover image: Niels Fabæk.*

# Was Jorn an Activist?

Lecture Performance on 7 WALKS

Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason (online)

19/02/2020 – 5 to 9 pm

Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (DK)

Activating different museum locations as the setting for the public performance:

entrance

exhibition room

lounge (downstairs)

reading room

Alvar Aalto conference room



*Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.*

*The cultural ideal is not passive enjoyment but as wide a circle as possible enter actively into cultural work – each person in his own field – so that this is not talk of cultural work for the people, but by the people.*

*Asger Jorn, Value and Economy*

## ENTRANCE

Since 2006 we have been working as the artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans. Our work focuses on the dynamics between art, real estate, economy and governing, and this from a very personal perspective. In our collaborative practice we define our own loft apartment in Brussels as an 'artwork'. Our home is not open for visits, but instead we create what we've named 'mediated extensions' of the space. These translate our domestic environment into installations, videos, publications and even public talks... In our work we use the house as an inspiration, and question how 'living in a house' is linked to a wider economy, property laws, gentrification, governing... The house as art work will frame the rest of the evening.

So how did we get here in Kunsten, in Aalborg, in this beautiful Alvar Aalto building? The artist platform *f.eks.* invited us to this part of Denmark for a two week research project. They set up a collaboration with Signe Meisner Christensen to participate in *OPEN*, a discursive programme that she initiated in Kunsten museum. They will both introduce their projects later in the evening, but we would like to thank them and all of the people they have mobilised for this collaboration, for the collective effort they have put into making all this possible.

Allow us to give a brief outline of the choreography of the evening. We will take you on a short tour along a few of Asger Jorn's paintings, presented in the museum. We will talk about Jorn when we come to these paintings, but it is important to know that our presentation this evening will not be one from the point of view of an art historian. We take an artist's point of view, meaning that we had a very specific interest in Jorn. He inspired us you could say... After that we'll go to the lower level and look at some archival documents, and then we will continue in the lecture hall. After the presentation we'll have a short break and a drink. There's time for a Q&A in the lounge area in front of the cafe... but first let's walk in the museum and submerge ourselves in the world of Jorn.

## MUSEUM EXHIBITION ROOM

*7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Laeso)* is an interdisciplinary collaboration between ourselves and Luke Mason, a legal philosopher. He'll join us later online. *7 Walks* is obviously about walking. The project connects the ecology of the arts with a natural commons: water. It focuses on water sources as specific case studies and develops 'walking' as a performative methodology within the context of the 'therapeutic' landscapes of (historic) spa towns. We are working with a legal philosopher to initiate creative thinking about law and property, and how perhaps they can be considered in a more layered, a more stratified way, so that more people, more than just the owner, can benefit from property.

Our project starts from a number of historical figures who had outspoken ideas about property, value, and art. In *7 Walks* we 're-enact' some of the walks of these historical figures, to be inspired by, or to bring their dialogues on property relations into the present day. And Asger Jorn is a very good example here. Jorn owned several properties throughout his life: a studio and house in Albisola in Italy, a studio in Paris, and a farmhouse/studio on Læsø. Jorn always wanted to bring art and life closer together. His practice was very focused on collaborating with other artists and he initiated a number of collective art movements, for which his studios often became the physical setting. In a way he was an extremely generous person, and you could say that the idea of the gift was central to his life and work, but some of the ambiguity we found in the figure of Jorn is also present early on. His commercial success he translates into generosity, buying art from his friends and supporting collective work. We'll see how Jorn ceaselessly has tried to reconcile the singularity of the artist with his social ideals...<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "For Jorn, the artwork is a link in the social network rather than an alienated object. From his earliest days as a Communist youth organizer, Jorn actively sought collective contexts to develop artistic experiments in relationship to others. His actions deliberately challenged the notion of creativity as an individual heritage. His attempts at collective artistic production depended on the singularity of contributions from individual participants, but at the same time deliberately challenged the notion that creativity means individual talent by basing his experiments directly on earlier avant-garde models of collectivity." See: Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2014), 81.

We are here in front of a wall of paintings, selected by the contemporary artist Carsten Holler. All of them by artists that are in one way or another connected to *CoBra*. The paintings by Jorn were made in 1941-43 when he was still part of the Danish artist group *Host*. During the German occupation (1939-45) Jorn also started *Helhesten*, a magazine that was critical of the German forces. From very early in his life Jorn was politically active. He became a member of the communist party and distributed at the time illegal communist news bulletins. In 1947 the concept of Social Realism in art was strongly opposed by the *Helhesten* artists who defended artistic freedom from within the communist party.

In France Jorn was attracted to the newly formed *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire*, a group of young writers who challenged the surrealist André Breton. He went to their conference in Brussels in 1947 where he met Belgian poet Christian Dotremont. Their idea was to unite political commitment for a communist and socialist society with artistic work.

This project failed, but it led to Jorn, Dotremont, Appel, Constant and Corneille joining forces in a new group named *CoBra* (Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam). The group was active from 1948-51. Work on an international magazine, co-edited by Dotremont and Jorn, began. Jorn invited all participants to Denmark. In 1949 *CoBra* held a summer-camp in Bregnerød. The so-called *Bregnerød Congress* was a two-week conference of art-making, cooking, writing, and general merriment, where they collectively decorated a summer house of architectural students. *CoBra* artists shared a way of working that integrated art and architecture in an intuitive way, without plans or sketches. This free, informal and spontaneous art would become characteristic for Jorn's and *CoBra* artists' practices.



***“Create, artist, do not speak.” This speech has been made to us all too often by people who claim to speak for us, think for us and act for us: politicians, intellectuals, industrialists, teachers, art critics and others. And we have always been betrayed. I create, I think and I speak... The reason why the artist is today obliged to speak out is not that the public demands a literary explanation of a certain kind of artistic creation, it is that it always gets false ones.***<sup>2</sup> Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.

<sup>2</sup> Asger Jorn, Concerning Form, 44–46. Translated by Thomas Y. Levin as “Opening Speech to the First World Congress of Free Artists in 1956, in Alba, Italy,” Situationist International Online, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/opening.html> (accessed January 28, 2020).



*Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.*



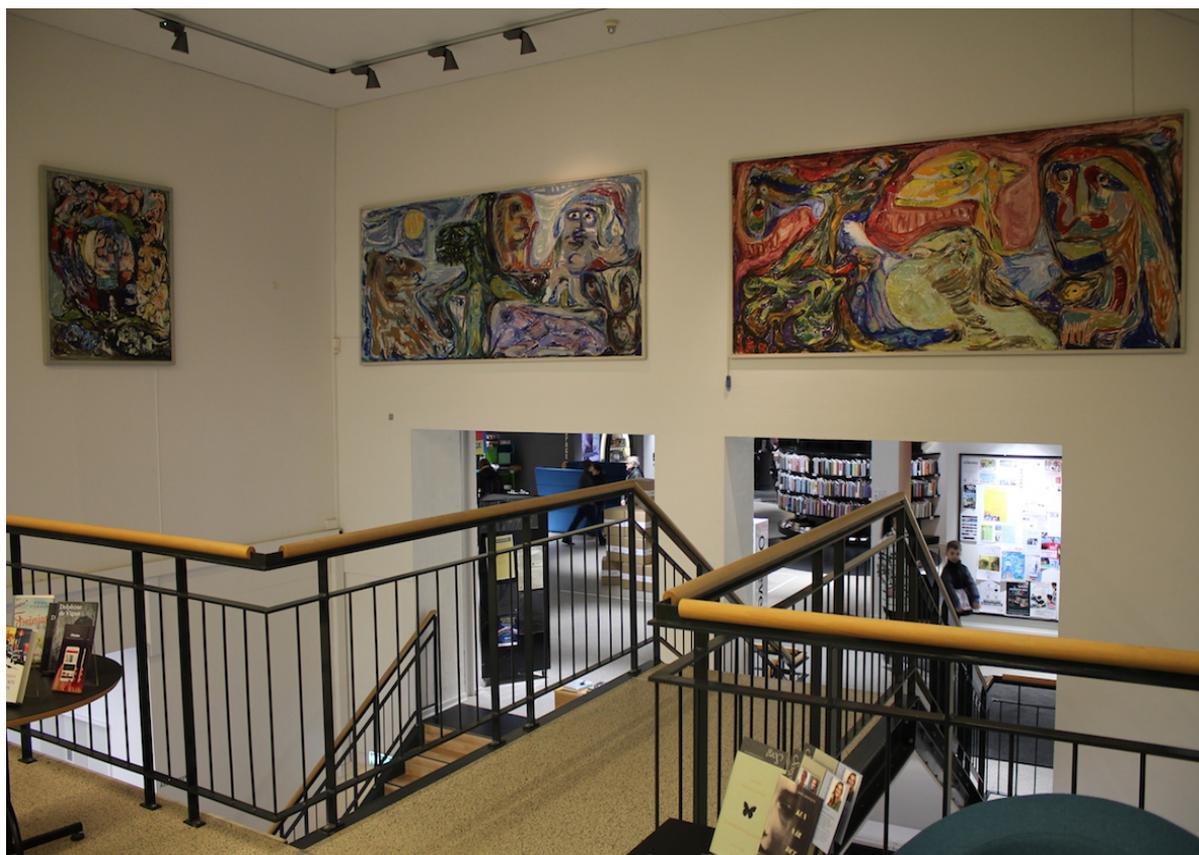
*Silkeborg Sanatorium. Photo credits: unknown*

*First I would point out, that these pictures are not given to the town out of gratefulness - quite the contrary. It is not a payment for kindness shown by the town, the only thing I have to be indebted to the town for is that it is willing to receive my art in such an honourable place. I can with perfect justice call this a favour, and my gratitude is twofold, because the favour done to me by Silkeborg came at the point, which is the only one which interests me: my art.*

*Asger Jorn, speech at the Silkeborg Library, 1953*

In 1951 Jorn was admitted in the sanatorium in the historic spa town of Silkeborg, together with the poet Christian Dotremont, since they both had contracted tuberculosis. In this period in his life Jorn was very poor and sick. Jorn proposed to paint the dining room of the sanatorium when he felt better, but the institute had no interest. Instead he created three 'mural paintings on canvas' which he donated to the local library in Silkeborg. The library had served him well during his illness and the presence of Jorn's paintings in the library once more illustrates Jorn's lifelong struggle to produce art that is simultaneously challenging and accessible to a broader public.

Also the tiny new museum for history, culture and art in Silkeborg sustained the poor and sick Jorn. They financed production at the neighbouring ceramics workshop and acquired ceramics. In return Jorn promised to help enlarge its collection in the future. We will talk more about this downstairs where we have installed three vitrines with archival documents that give an insight in Jorn's ideas on the notion of the gift.



*“It is a fact that art can't be paid, partly because there is no economic cover for an artistic effort, and partly because a work of art in itself has no value at all. This calls for an explanation and it may be this, that no painting, however good it seems to us is anything in itself except chemicals smeared on a flat surface.*

*The value in the work of art is in the spectator, you see, and a painting has no bigger value than the mental and intellectual forces it arouses in the spectator. I know that some people in Silkeborg will be unmoved by my art, when they see my paintings, yes several will even be unpleasantly affected by the sight of these stains of colour, because they don't say anything to them. Some of them will keep silent and some will talk. Exactly with this knowledge, and because I know that these people are the only criterion of art, I am grateful. I am grateful, because there after all is somebody who will see something in what I have produced.”<sup>3</sup>*

*Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans*

<sup>3</sup> Excerpt of Asger Jorn's speech at the Library of Silkeborg, September 10th 1953. Full version at: [https://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text\\_presentation.asp1/?AjrDcmntId=260](https://www.museumjorn.dk/en/text_presentation.asp1/?AjrDcmntId=260)

## LOUNGE (DOWSTAIRS)

We've selected documents and newspaper clippings from the museum archive that either show successful versions of how Jorn's practice embodied a form of gift economy, and on the other hand how some of these gifts have gone sour. The latter often is related to what happened to his work and properties after his dead.

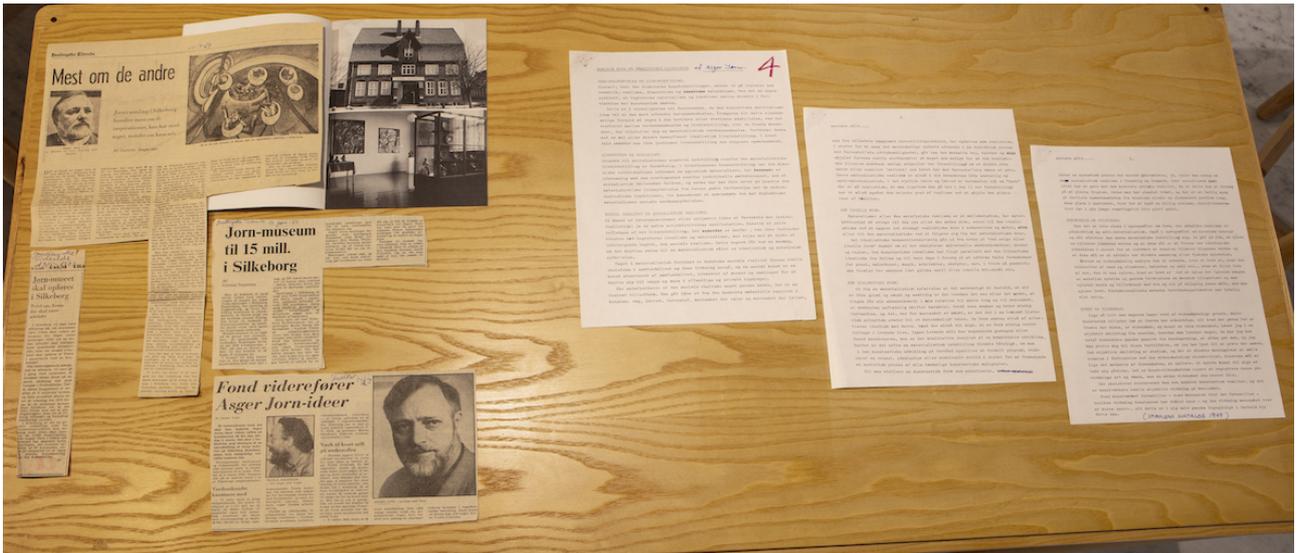
As we mentioned before Jorn donated three paintings to the library. Today these paintings are still hanging in the library for everyone to enjoy.

Museum Jorn in Silkeborg embodies Jorn's ideas on the gift economy that were central to his life and practice. The museum originated with Jorn's donation of more than 5000 art works throughout his career, by himself and some of his colleagues, to the town's small museum of history and art. This local museum had supported him during his years of poverty and ill health when he was suffering from tuberculosis and stayed at the Silkeborg Sanatorium. They financed the production of ceramics at the neighbouring ceramics workshop, and acquired some pieces. In return Jorn promised to help enlarge the local museum's collection in the future. When Jorn started having commercial success in the art market he translated this into generosity towards some of his friends and colleagues, buying their art work.

The whole makes for an impressive collection. Jorn considered his gift to Silkeborg also a provocation, since such a huge collection would need care and a place to be presented. Jorn's gift did not include money, so a home needed to be found for the collection. In 1959 an exhibition of Jorn's donations was held in Silkeborg. Subsequently in 1966 the donated collection became an independent museum. Plans had to be made to house this enormous collection, for which also the Danish architect Jørn Utzon made a proposal. Unfortunately that was never realised.

*He who manufactures articles of utility does it primarily because he has use for them. If he makes more than he can use himself.. then he can give it away. This is called potlatch. However, it is this productive surplus value, and only this, which is made into commodities, first by the exchange of surplus products in barter and then by being exchanged for money.*

*Asger Jorn, Value and Economy*



Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Documents from Kunsten Museum archive. Photo credits: Niels Fabæk.

His property in Italy is another example... In 1957 Jorn bought a house and studio in Albisola, which he had gradually transformed in line with his ideas on *unitary urbanism*, bringing life and architecture together. In a spirit of Dionysian play and co-operation he started restoring the ruinous house and garden in Albisola, integrating wall paintings and ceramics into the garden and the house with the help of Umberto Gambetta, a local worker who became a lifelong friend. Jorn donated the house and art works to the community of Albisola, on condition that the property became public, and that Umberto and his wife could live there till the end of their lives. Currently the Casa Jorn is a museum that is run on voluntary basis by a group of art historians from the University of Genoa. In the conference room we will show pictures of our visit to the house and garden in 2019.

Last examples are the donations to Århus Statsgymnasium, which we admired on a research trip to Århus... After four years of negotiations Jorn finally accepted the commission *“because of the opposition between the controlled, classical functionalist forms of the school and his own free, imagination-driven art: ‘Every game has its rules, also art. I’ll enjoy figuring out such a constricted assignment’*.<sup>4</sup> Jorn agreed to make a ceramic wall piece for the Århus Statsgymnasium. *The Big Relief* is integrated in the modernist school building. Jorn produced it in Albisola in four months in the summer of 1959. Under the guidance of Eliseo Salino it was realized in the ceramic workshop San Giorgio. It measures 3 × 27 meters, and contains 1200 individual hand-cut tiles, that were installed in Århus by three workers from the Albisola workshop. Jorn had negotiated a double commission. In 1961 he also produced *The Long Journey*, a woven tapestry, measuring 14 metres. The tapestry was made in collaboration with the artist Pierre Wemaëre. Jorn seized the opportunity to put in practice his ideas on *“unifying art and architecture in personal, expressive forms that provided a more lively social experience in the space”*.<sup>5</sup> Jorn invested his whole stipend in the production of the both pieces. A copy of the tapestry is hanging in the big meeting hall of the school. The original, which has more faded colors, is now on display in Museum Jorn.



*“Jorn’s choice of ceramic and weaving over painting or sculpture in the Århus decorations reflected his belief in the equality of ‘craft’ and ‘fine art’. Jorn wanted to democratize art through his belief that everyone should be able to make his own interpretation of art and that so-called ‘primitive’ art forms were as valid (if not more valid) vehicles of expression as fine art.”*<sup>6</sup> Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.

<sup>4</sup> Shona Kallestrup, Asger Jorn’s School Decoration in Århus Statsgymnasium, Denmark, 1959-61. In: *The Decorated School*, eds. [Catherine Burke](#); [Jeremy Howard](#); [Peter Cunningham](#) (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*



*Photo credits: Lux (Savona, Italy)*



*Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans*



*The secret of art consists in the simple fact that it is more blessed to give than to take, but also that this blessedness is dependent upon voluntary giving, so that what's given is felt as a surplus, a wealth, not a duty. This is the simple materialistic explanation of the value of the art work and for all other things called spiritual values. In relation to the practical values, art is a counter-value, the value of productive pleasure. Art is the goal for a discharge of energy without a precise goal, except the one that the receiver can discover. In this way, art is a source of benevolence, is what is called 'grace'.*

*Asger Jorn, Value and Economy*

Some of Jorn's work and property ended up in a problematic situation. In our vitrines you'll also find some examples on that. Let's start with Jorn's property on Læsø. In 1964 Jorn had bought a farmstead on the island of Læsø from a fellow traveller on the train. The house would only be ready for use in 1968. Until then Albisola remained Jorn's main working place. Through the years a small art community developed on Læsø with, among others, Jorn's dealer Børge Birch who had also bought a house on the island. After Jorn's death the house fell to ruins. Today Jorn's house on Læsø is privately owned. Tom Christoffersen, a gallerist from Copenhagen, bought it in 2007. A year later he sold a share to businessman Peter Linder. Together they organised an extensive renovation of the house, which was completed in 2009. In 2010, Linder and the Læsø Municipality founded the Jorn-Læsø Scholarship with the idea to develop the house and adjoining studio as an artist residency. Unfortunately, disagreement over the way in which artists residents can be marketed, caused the project to fail. The house is currently rented out in summer as an airbnb. We have some images from our private walk on Læsø together with Scott Raby of f.eks.



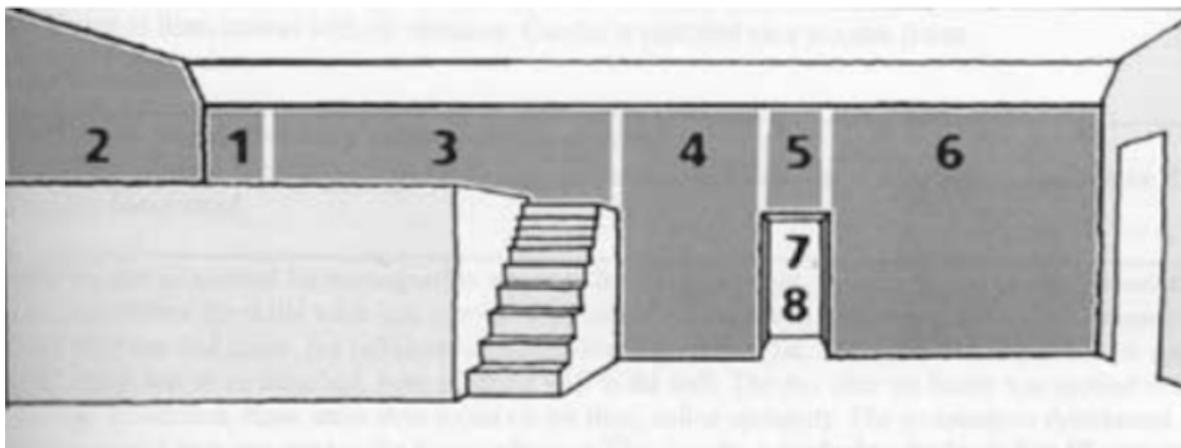
*Læsø, summer 1969. Photo credit: Frank Lund*



*Læsø, summer 2007 before restoration. Photo credit: Jessen-Klixbøll*

In July 1965, Jorn spontaneously performed a 44 square meter mural in the art dealer Børge Birch's summer house on Læsø. According to historian Lars Morell, the work depicts a summer day from morning to evening. *"Lively and colourful brushstrokes traversed from one wall to another, sliding around corners into a corridor, travelling up to an upper level – this was not a simple mural on a flat rectangular surface."*<sup>7</sup>

When he was getting older Birch offered the wall painting for free, to whomever could preserve and transport it, as is mentioned in the clippings. We'll show you later in the lecture hall where the wall painting eventually ends up, and why Birch's decision to dismantle the mural was problematic...

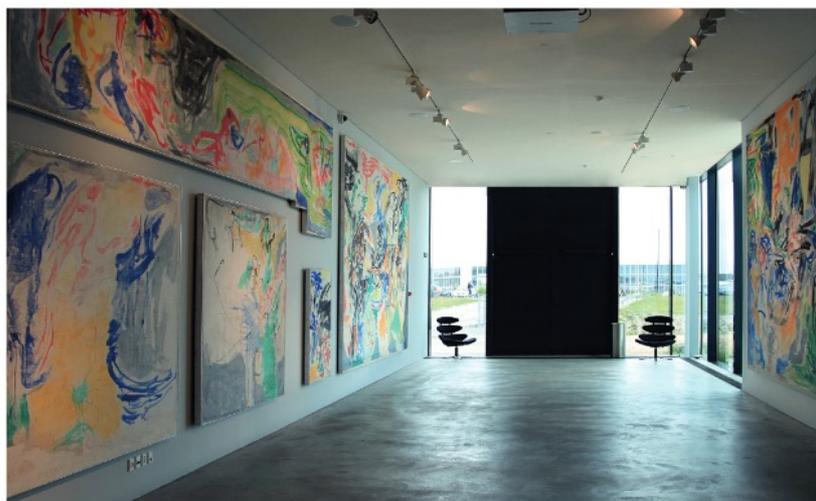


## ASGER JORN- GALLERIET

– Eksklusivt møderum

I Asger Jorn-Galleriet holder I jeres møder og præsentationer omgivet af Asger Jorns fantastiske og farvestærke vægmalerier fra kunsthändler Børge Birchs sommerhus på Læsø.

Galleriet er ideelt til bestyrelsesmøder, mindre netværksarrangementer og kurser. Mødelokalet ligger i direkte forlængelse af de gallerier, som rummer særudstillingerne.



## ARKEN

*"The fibreglass/epoxy support with an aluminium honeycomb core was constructed in a way that enabled a recreation of the original three-dimensional configuration in the interior of the Arken Museum of Modern Art. Instead, the painting was hung as part of the permanent exhibition as seven individual units, separated from each other, and in random sequence (see image above). One can no longer follow the sweeping brushstrokes over the large surface. There is no information about the painting's origin or history. As a result, the viewer perceives this as a collection of easel paintings."*<sup>8</sup> Photo credits: Arken Museum.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://journals.openedition.org/ceroart/1127>

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem



*Læsø, winter 2020, Jorn's house after restoration. Photo credit: Vermeir & Heiremans*

## ALVAR AALTO CONFERENCE ROOM

When everybody is seated we can continue... We mentioned the wall drawing in Birch's summer house on Læsø. This was not a simple mural on a flat rectangular surface. Twenty some years later, Birch decided to donate the painting to the city of Copenhagen. He would not let himself be convinced that the mural belonged where the artist had created it. The painting was divided into manoeuvrable sections, detached and transported to the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Ishøj near Copenhagen, where it was mounted on a movable support. Separated from its original location, we wonder if it has retained some of its potential meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Let's come back to the property on Læsø. Two winter storms have made an organised public visit to the island of Læsø impossible. So we're grateful that Scott William Raby (f.eks.) made a private visit to Jorn's house and studio on the island possible. The images we took during our visit to his house and studio show clearly that Jorn's approach to his properties in Albisola and Læsø was quite different. Until the house on Læsø would be ready for use in 1968, Albisola remained his main working place. Both studio's are empty spaces. The living areas however couldn't be more different. His house on Læsø was merely a functional space. In Albisola Jorn invested a lot of time and effort to transform the house and garden into an artistic project, creating a total work of art.

After his cure in Silkeborg Jorn travels to Switzerland and to Albisola in Italy. Albisola was a gathering place of international artists experimenting with ceramics. In Albisola Jorn organised an international meeting on ceramic art. He wanted to give shape to the theories he was developing around MIBI, the *Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste*. He had initiated this movement in a reaction to a new 'bauhaus' that was to be set up in Ulm, in which free art had no longer a place. MIBI brought together the 'free artists', from the *Helhesten* and *CoBra*.<sup>10</sup>

Jorn transforms the two entities and garden of his old farmer's house in Albisola, with the help of Berto into an artistic environment, together realizing his ideas for *unitary urbanism (UU)*. The total integration of art and architecture was later also one of the major early Situationist concerns. *UU* stands on two tenets: one is the rejection of the overly functional, urban architectural design, and two is the rejection of the detachment of art from its surroundings. In this ideal, structural and artistic elements of humanity's metropolitan surroundings are blended into such grey areas that one cannot identify where function ends and play begins. The resulting society, while it caters to fundamental needs, does so in an atmosphere of continual exploration, leisure, and ambience.<sup>11</sup>

Albisola is central to the idea of the gift in Jorn's life and practice. In *Value and Economy* Jorn speaks about a potlatch<sup>12</sup> – a valuable gift, inviting the receiver to give something back in return. The reference suggests that Jorn saw his gift economy also as a way to establish a certain position.

In 1973 he is admitted in the hospital in Århus. He returns briefly to Albisola, to confirm an act in which he donates his house and garden, decorated with wall paintings, reliefs and sculptures to the Albisola Marina Community. He gives Umberto Gambetta and his wife the lifelong right to live in the house and til the garden, before he dies in May 1973.

After a long restoration – made possible with local, regional and EU funding – Jorn's house was re-opened to the public in 2014, in a public celebration of Jorn's centenary with Italian and Danish institutions, as [Casa Museo Asger Jorn](#).

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<sup>9</sup> See: <https://journals.openedition.org/ceroart/1127>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/5988/letter-from-asger-jorn-to-max-bill/en>

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitary\\_urbanism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitary_urbanism)

<sup>12</sup> A potlatch is the name for a gift-giving feast practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States, among whom it is traditionally the primary governmental institution, legislative body, and economic system. A potlatch involves giving away or destroying wealth or valuable items in order to demonstrate a leader's wealth and power. The status of any family is raised not by who has the most resources, but by who distributes the most resources. The hosts demonstrate their wealth and prominence through giving away goods.



*Albisola, winter 2019. Visit to Casa Jorn. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Casa Jorn.*

*Me, Asger Jorn, allow no member of my family the right to access my house, garden or studio placed in Via G. D'Annuncio, Albisola, since I owe them nothing, no one is allowed to take objects and things that are on the property which will soon no longer be mine. Umberto Gambetta and his wife Teresa are the only people in charge and the guardian of everything. They have the right to use throughout their lifetime the garden, the studio and the house and to till the fields.*

*Asger Jorn, Act (1973)*



*Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Slide: production of the Big Relief in Albisola; Jorn and Berto installing a ceramic piece on the wall of the house. Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.*



*Albisola, winter 2019. Visit to Casa Jorn. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Casa Jorn.*



*On 12 August 1975 the Danish newspaper Jylland Post ran an article entitled **Albisola inherits Jorn's house and garden.** "The property, which is on a slope, according to Jorn's will was bestowed on the local authorities on the condition that the house and garden become available to the public. Although the Albisola authorities have, in principle, declared themselves willing to take over the site, we have not yet received the final official response, says legal consultant Ole Olsen, who took care of the (Jorn) estate's interests, to the Berlingske Tidende. He and Troels Andersen, (the at the time director of the Silkeborg Art Museum), will be traveling to Albisola shortly to assist in the design of the final acquisition document."*

*Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Casa Jorn.*



*Albisola, winter 2019. Visit to Casa Jorn. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Casa Jorn.*



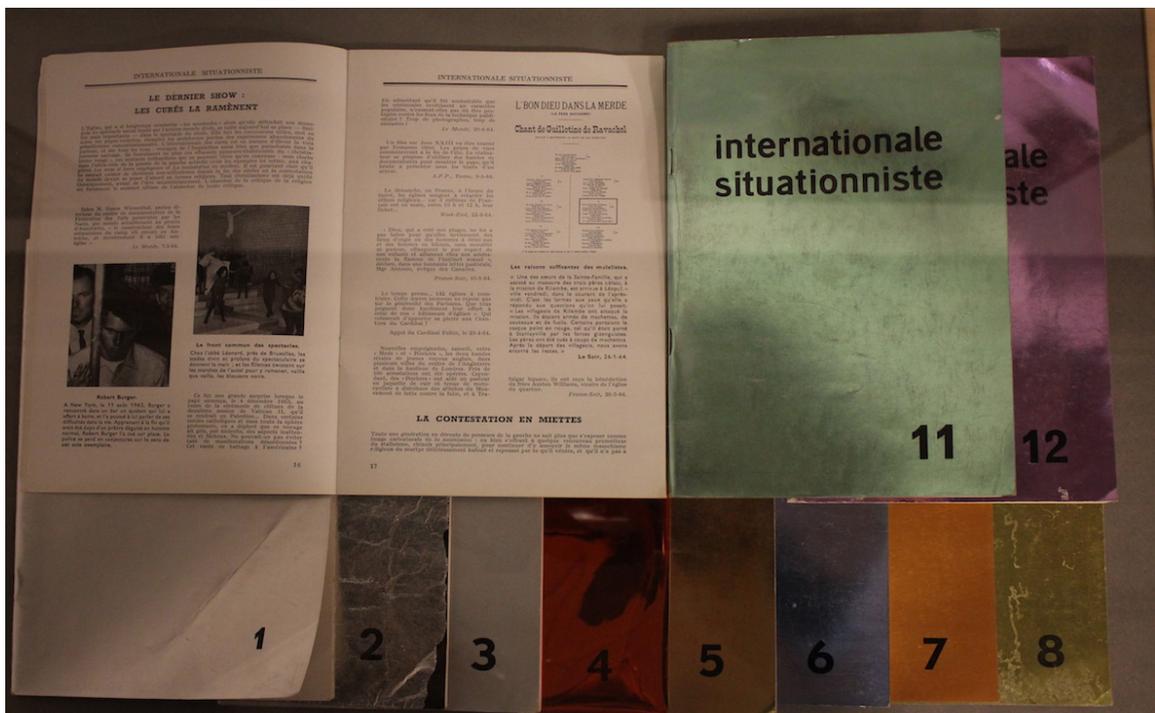
*Albisola, winter 2019. Visit to Casa Jorn. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Casa Jorn.*

We mentioned some of Jorn's different collaborations, such as the Danish Helhesten group (1941-44), CoBra (1948-51), the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB, 1953-56), the Situationist International (SI, 1957-72) and the Scandinavian Institute for Comparative Vandalism (SICV, 1961-65).

In 1957 Jorn participated in the conference that led to the merger of the *International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus*, the *Lettriste Internationale*, and *London Psychogeographical Association* to form the *Situationist International*. The *Situationist International* was co-founded in Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, by Asger Jorn, Guy Debord, Michèle Bernstein, Ralph Rumney, Walter Olmo, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone, and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio. Jorn and Debord started a publication under the same name. Jorn encouraged many artists to join.

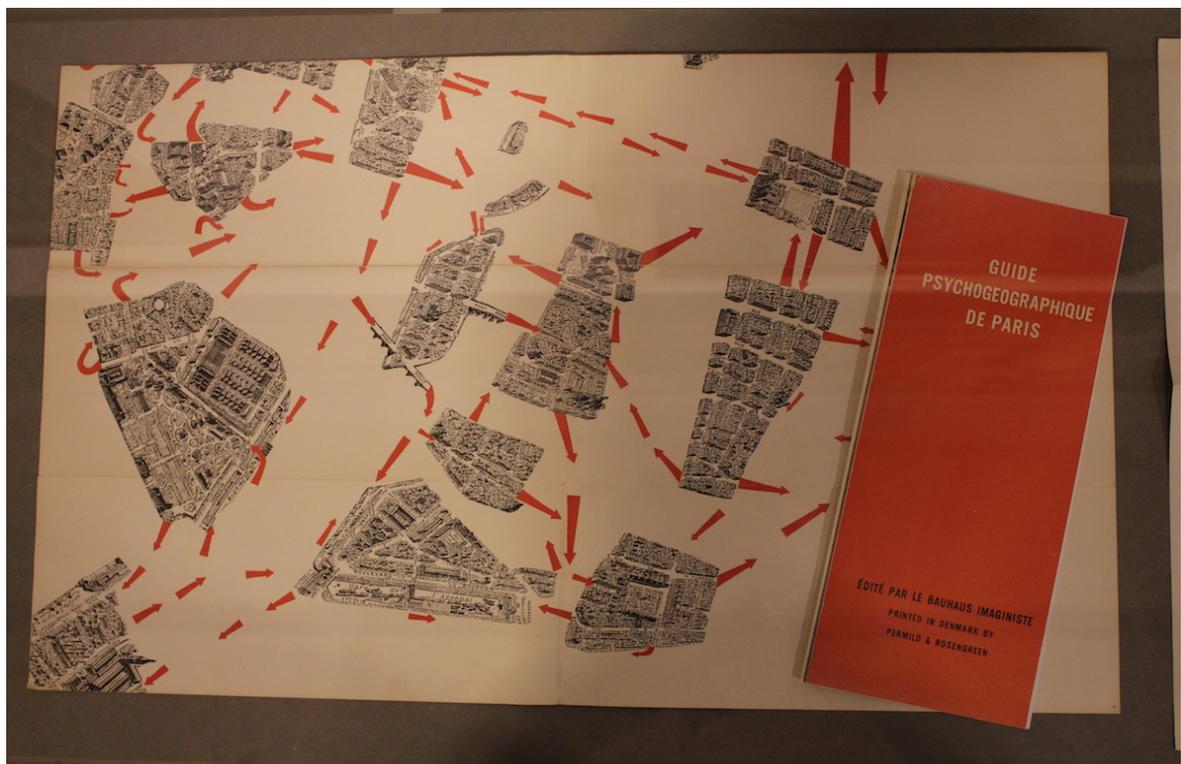
Once again we see how for Jorn the *Situationist International* was a concrete effort to reconcile social and artistic ideals. Here he applied scientific and mathematical knowledge drawn from Niels Bohr to develop his own '*sitological technique*'. Jorn never believed in a conception of the Situationist ideas as exclusively artistic and separated from political involvement. He was at the root and at the core of the Situationist International project, fully sharing the revolutionary intentions with Debord. The situationists' general principles were an attack on the capitalist exploitation and degradation of the life of people, and solution of alternative life experiences, construction of situations, unitary urbanism, psychogeography, with the union of play, freedom, walking and critical thinking. Such general principles were applied by Jorn to painting.<sup>13</sup>

But after some time most of the artists found themselves excluded from the movement by an ever more strictly ideologically minded Debord. Artists for him had become part of the *society of the spectacle* and were according to him too willing to take part in the commodification of their work. In 1961 Jorn amicably quit his activity in the SI, still fully supporting its contents and its revolutionary goals, and continuing to support it financially, but believing that the new strategy of the SI was ineffective. The situationists were to be a great trigger and part of the 1968 student revolts. Jorn makes some of their posters but watched the May 68 student protests in Paris from a distance. In 1972 SI is disbanded.



Silkeborg, winter 2020, visit to Museum Jorn. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Museum Jorn.

<sup>13</sup> See: [https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Asger\\_Jorn](https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Asger_Jorn). Accessed 25 January 2020.



*The situationists hoped to escape reified art objects and looked to discover a utopian space of free creative subjects. For them the revolution of society became the final movement in art, and this poetry of everyday life was to be made by everybody. The artist was to create new situations for a new kind of human being.*  
Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans

Finally we'd like to say something about 7 Walks. The project has its origin in Spa, the Belgian town from which the word spa derives. In Spa we saw the opportunity to connect the ecology of the arts with a natural commons.

Already in the 16th century Spa had become famous for its healing ferruginous water sources. Spa became known as the 'café de l'Europe', a kind of Davos for the European elites of that time. It was a place where the artistic and political visions of the visitors, and their conflicting ideas on property could confront each other, during walks on the way to the sources...

In Spa we, together with Luke Mason, will 're-enact' some of the walks of these historical figures in a dialogue on property relations with public and with invited experts from different disciplines. The project is a cross-disciplinary research project on property relationships that focuses on a more sustainable art ecology based on a commoning principle.

Water sources in Spa are currently exploited by Spa Monopole. The company has the exclusive rights of use of the water.



*The Fountains of Sauvinière and Groisbeeck near Spa. In: Karl Ludwig von Pollnitz, Amusemens des Eaux de Spa, 1735. Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans. Courtesy Archive Fonds Albin Body.*

**Next page:**

**Health cures in Silkeborg were centred around the famous ferruginous source Arnakkekilden. The water from the springs was instrumental to the health treatments that the guests could subject themselves to. Drinking ferruginous water was considered a healing and preventive measure against all sorts of ailments. Since 1968 its waters have been exploited by the local Silkeborg brewery Neptun. Today the multinational Carlsberg holds the exclusive right to bottle and distribute the water. Photo credits: Niels Fabæk.**



*Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Photo credits: Niels Fabæk.*



*“The opposition between between the inventor – the artist in this connection is a kind of inventor – and the worker is that the worker's reproduced products can be compared with another product and evaluated on the basis of common characteristics. The new cannot be compared with anything at all... It can only be compared in its dissimilarity... For the new there is no given equivalence.” (Asger Jorn, Value and Economy). Photo credits: Niels Fabæk.*

We found a parallel in the historic spa town of Silkeborg. Today the water of its famous ferruginous source, the Arnakkekilden, is exploited by the multinational company Carlsberg. Our choice for Silkeborg was specific in terms of physical space, but also in terms of its history. As we already mentioned Jorn was admitted in the Silkeborg Sanatorium for a tuberculosis treatment, so we decided to look into the artist Asger Jorn as a possible starting point for the 're-enactment' of a historical walk at the site of the source. We wanted to revisit Jorn, not as experts or art historians, but as artists that felt that his work could inspire us for contemporary questions around property and value. Luke Mason who now has joined us online will go into that... Luke the floor is yours.

*7 Walks* explores walking as a methodology. As a way to physically traverse the property structures that are being discussed, walking allows the examination of apparently fixed 'legal' ideas. Walking was also relevant to Jorn. As the co-founder of the *Situationist International* the practice of walking (*dérive*) aimed to bring about a revolution in daily life. For the situationists the city was the arena where that revolution could take place, precisely by using urban situations against their very intentions, in particular administrative, aesthetic, bourgeois, political or pragmatic. For them, walking the city became a most important tool for change. For *7 Walks* the natural settings of spa towns are the focus of attention as their natural resources are more and more under pressure of privatisation.

For the conversations during the walks we found an interesting entry in Jorn's writings. In his texts Jorn combines ideas from a wide variety of disciplines including politics, physics, economics, philosophy, anthropology, structuralism even art theory. He brings these various interests together in complex and unconventional writings, in search of a comprehensive theory of art and life. We decided to focus on a text published in 1959 in the *Situationist International* magazine: *Value and Economy* (English translation, 1962).

The text embodies numerous ambiguities, and in general you could say that in it Jorn attempts to reconcile the unique and individual position of artists as a "creative elite" with his socialist ideals. The text provided us with different anchor points for discussions during the walk. We highlighted Jorn's ideas on art in relation to value, politics, the gift economy, equivalence, uniqueness, exploitation and property. In that way our discussions could indirectly connect to the absoluteness of property and its legal concepts.

For the excursion to Silkeborg, we invited Signe Meisner Christensen and William Scott Raby, as well as a group of enthusiasts to join us. The group discussions we brought together in concise visualisations of the conversations, so-called concept maps. Concept maps we can associate with constructivist theories of learning in which learners are active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge, involving our knowledge and emotions, enhanced by a strong motivation to find new meaning. The mapping thus enables a higher level of expression and transparency. And it is user-generated. Mapping in combination with walking helps to visualise and abstract a first-person point of view, a phenomenological encounter with the space/landscape.

Mapping not only enhanced our experience that the research, the performative action of walking and the discussions could become a shared artistic practice. At the same time the maps could record some findings on political economy and ownership. They have a value that can be shared. Creating the maps together with participants helps to generate a deep reflection on philosophical and legal issues of ownership. It is shared political awareness. When combined with a performative action it could also generate a spiritual reflection on basic values.

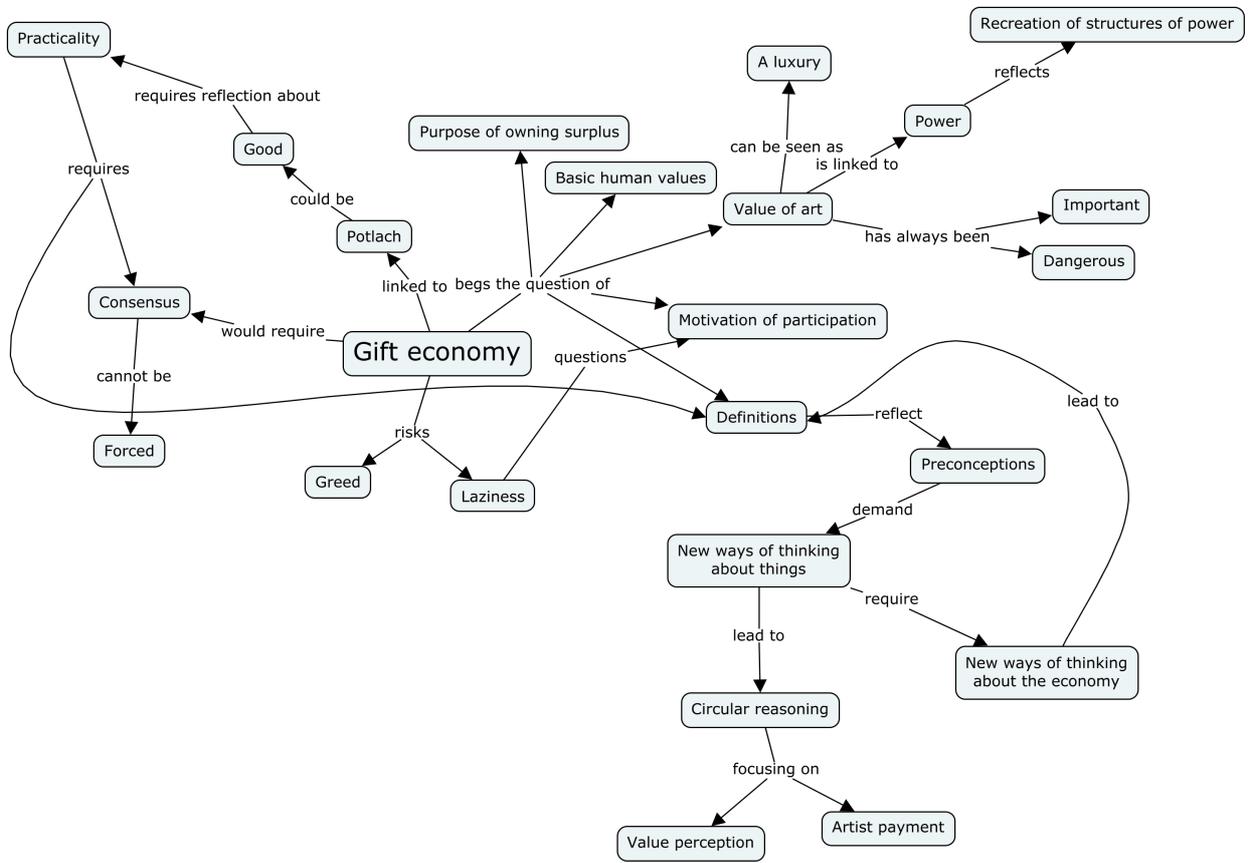
Underlying the maps is the debate on political economy. It is distilled from *that* moment in time, and *that* encounter, through the method of walking, with *that* specific place. The maps are not collecting data to create statistics, they do not need to overlap conceptually with future maps. The maps and the walking are supposed to create some freedom to imagine new narratives on property, law and governing through *deep thinking* and a phenomenological encounter with space. Silkeborg has been a learning experience, all of the above we have been able to try out, which of course helped us enormously to concretise *7 Walks*.



*Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Photo credits: Rikke Ehlers Nilsson.*

*... value never under any circumstances can be a state of things, a constant. Thus value does not exist in the same way as things. Values arise and pass away. One cannot therefore own values, as it is so nicely put. One can only own objects containing a latent value, a possible value. Thus in theory all objects possess values, if people are able to extract them.*

*Asger Jorn, Value and Economy*



*Concept Map (coded): Gift Economy.  
 Courtesy Luke Mason*



*Retrieving a Modification painting by Jorn from the archive of Kunsten Museum.*

*Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Photo credits: Vermeir & Heiremans (top); Rikke Ehlers Nilsson (bottom).*

## MUSEUM BAR: JORN ER SØD!

Let's round up...

Taking water as a case study, acknowledging it within a natural ecology, it is clear that water cannot be just any commodity. It is one of life's necessities. Jorn took a very outspoken position in the debate about the value of art and the position of the artist in society. He inspired us in our understanding that also art is a life necessity. It was great experience to work here. We're very happy to have been able to connect to Jorn. Many thanks!

Last but not least, let's end where we started, with the work of Asger Jorn. This is a painting that was recently acquired by Kunsten Museum. It is a so-called Modification painting. It was taken out of the depot to be displayed here for your enjoyment...

Modification paintings are a painterly version of "détournement," a Situationist technique, described in 1956 by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman as the systematic revaluation of "prefabricated aesthetic products." "Détournement is a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*," writes Jorn in his study *Detoured Painting* (May 1959), and he goes on to say that all the elements of the cultural past must be "reinvested" or disappear. He describes it as "clashing head-on against all social and legal conventions."

In 1941, he wrote the key theoretical essay, "Intimate Banalities," published in *Helhesten*, which claimed that the future of art was kitsch and praised amateur landscape paintings as "the best art today."

*If you have old paintings, do not despair. Retain your memories but detourn them so that they correspond with your era. Why reject the old, if one can modernize it?*

*Asger Jorn*



*Jorn er sød! (Jorn is sweet!) Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason, Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø). Documentary video. Photo credits: Niels Fabæk.*

**Was Jorn an Activist? - lecture performance on 7 Walks (from Albisola to Silkeborg & Læsø)**

by Vermeir & Heiremans and Luke Mason was made in collaboration with -

- f.eks.
- OPEN - Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg
- Nordplyst, Aalborg
- Kunstpionererne, Aalborg
- Gallery Tom Christoffersen, Copenhagen
- Greenway, Aalborg
- Casa Anne Maries vej, Aalborg
- School of Law, Birmingham City University (BCU)
- Jubilee, platform for artistic research and production, Brussels.

*f.eks. is a roaming exhibition platform for contemporary art initiated by Scott William Raby and Rikke Ehlers Nilsson. It is an artist-initiated, non-profit organization that seeks to generate critical and speculative dialogues between audiences, artists, and broader publics. The platform seeks to co-develop experimental artistic projects with both Danish and International artists that generate critical and speculative dialogues between communities, contexts, and broader social frameworks. f.eks. produces temporary art events that are located in and around the urban spaces of Aalborg – activating architecture, infrastructure, ecological sites, and public spaces through a series of live art engagements including performances, social installations, and many other forms of interactive and ephemeral art making.*

***Open** is a new multi-disciplinary platform for research, experimentation and civic engagement at Kunsten Museum in Aalborg. Open embraces artistic forms of interrogating the world, it articulates questions and initiates collaborations with various actors and inhabitants in Aalborg and beyond. Open is process-driven, it interweaves artistic research, conversations, lectures, performances, screenings and workshops. This initiative thus sets out to learn more about how process-driven, collective knowledge production can become an integral part of museum practice. It seeks to position the museum as an active agent in connecting to contemporary life in Aalborg. Open is part of Signe Meisner Christensen's three-year postdoctoral research project and is funded by New Carlsberg Foundation.*