

# The Life and Times of JACQUELINE de JONG

JACQUELINE DE JONG WAS BORN IN 1939, in the Dutch town of Hengelo, to liberal, contemporary art-collecting Jewish industrialists. In 1942, she and her mother fled to her mother's native Switzerland, where they stayed out the war in Zurich; one of the artist's earliest memories is being given chocolate by Salvation Army volunteers. When they returned to Amsterdam in 1946, De Jong had to learn to speak Dutch again.

De Jong's career has been characterized by border crossings – physically, ideologically and aesthetically. At the age of 19, while working part-time at the Stedelijk Museum, she became involved in the radical, anti-authoritarian, leftist movement, the situationist international. Although not trained as an artist, De Jong had always painted; she moved to Paris and, throughout the 1960s, made art brut- and CoBrA-inflected contortions of colour and animalistic form. Expelled from the situationist international by its *de facto* leader, Guy Debord, in 1962, De Jong responded by producing *The Situationist Times*, an experimental journal whose visual and verbal *dérive* – through essays, artworks and images – hewed to situationist principals while rejecting their increasingly totalitarian application. Six issues were printed between 1962 and 1967. De Jong marched with the Parisian students in 1968, printing posters in support of the movement at her

Jacqueline de Jong  
photographed  
in her studio, Amsterdam,  
2017, by Blommers &  
Schumm. Courtesy:  
Blommers & Schumm

studio in the 11th arrondissement. In the early 1970s, she moved back to Amsterdam, where she has lived ever since.

From the thickly impastoed abstractions of the early 1960s, De Jong's paintings became increasingly figurative as the decade progressed, in series such as 'Accidental Paintings' (1964), 'Suicide Paintings' (1965) and the humorously kinky 'Secret Life of the Cosmonauts' (1966). More conventional portraits appeared in the 1970s, rendered odd by tight crops and compressed perspectives (for instance, her 1977 series depicting snooker players, in which the tables' green felt nudges up against the painted surface), only to distort into Technicolor constructivism in the late 1990s. More recently, the agitated expressionism of her 1960s work has returned, as in the 2014 series 'War 1914–18', which nods to a lineage stretching from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) through Francisco de Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–20) to Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). From the banal to the brutal to the beautiful – and often all of these qualities simultaneously – De Jong's work covers a lot of ground: the avant-gardist turned thoroughly postmodern.

We might think of this refusal to sit still – in art, life and thought – as a kind of restless cosmopolitanism; De Jong calls it disobedience. In today's political climate, both sentiments feel more relevant than ever.





AS You were still a teenager when you became involved with the situationist international. How did that come to pass? Were you making art at the time?

JDJ I have always painted, but my introduction to the situationist international came while I was working part-time at the Stedelijk Museum in 1958. In fact, up to that point, I had been devoted to the idea of becoming an actress. I was 19, but I had already spent some time in Paris and in London, where I studied at the Guildhall School. I absolutely wanted to be on the stage. Luckily, we can say, I failed; so, I was looking for a job.

I came from a family of contemporary art collectors. They had a very avant-garde collection for the time – the only Willem de Kooning in private hands in the Netherlands, for instance – and they were friends with Willem Sandberg, the director of the Stedelijk. When I saw an announcement that the museum needed a part-time assistant, I went to Sandberg and said: ‘I don’t know anything, but I speak languages and I’m willing to learn: could you take me?’ That was, in a way, my education in the museum and art world. The same year, I met the painter Asger Jorn.

AS How?

JDJ I first met him, very briefly, on my 19th birthday, in Paris, where my father was fetching a painting from his house. I was living in Paris at the time. After I left school, my parents thought I had to learn perfect French, so I went to work at Christian Dior, in the boutique on avenue Montaigne. Dior died ten days after I started there. I was 18.

AS Did you meet Dior?

JDJ Yes, of course. He was a very nice, gentle man – but he was treated like royalty. In the boutique, they all submitted completely to him. By then, I was already rebelling against everything, so the thought of submitting to Dior ... you can imagine! After he died, everyone had to be in black; I told them: ‘Grey suits me fine.’ It was absolute hell working there, but it was good for my French.

AS What was Jorn’s reputation at that time?

JDJ He was well-known in artist circles, but not at all publicly. He became better known some months later, at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, with a painting called *Lettre à mon fils* (Letter to My Son, 1956–57). That was his breakthrough. When my father visited his house, he was just on the point of becoming well known, but still quite poor. Afterwards, he and my father went to a bar and got drunk. Bye-bye birthday!

AS What did you do at the Stedelijk?

JDJ At the Stedelijk, I was working in the department of industrial design, which was fascinating because it involved posters and books.

AS Sandberg himself was a brilliant graphic designer; he produced many of the museum’s catalogues from that time.

JDJ He was a typographer. I learned a lot from him: without his knowledge and help perhaps I would never have made *The Situationist Times*.

Another part of my role at the Stedelijk was to greet journalists at press conferences: you know, a young girl to stand there and smile and be charming. (We’re talking about the late 1950s, of course, but I’m sure it’s the same today.) That’s how I met [the Dutch situationists] Armando and Constant [Nieuwenhuys].

From the other side, there was Jorn. He and I were lovers by then – secretly at first, because he had a wife and children, although they separated in 1959. He was also much older than I was – by 25 years. Jorn told me about Gruppe SPUR – young German artists, about my age, who were also part of the situationist international – whom he had just met in Munich.



“What I was interested in, quite simply, was changing the world.”

JACQUELINE DE JONG

OPPOSITE PAGE  
Jacqueline de Jong,  
rue de Charonne,  
Paris, 1965. Courtesy:  
the artist; photographer  
unknown

RIGHT  
*Private Property of a Space  
Technician*, 1966, acrylic  
on canvas, 130 × 97 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist and  
Château Shatto,  
Los Angeles



LEFT  
*The Situationist Times*,  
1962–67, covers of  
issues 5 and 6,  
designed and edited by  
Jacqueline de Jong.  
Courtesy: the artist  
and the Beinecke  
Library, Yale University,  
New Haven

AS Why did the situationists interest you?

JDJ What I was interested in, quite simply, was changing the world.

AS As the Dutch section wrote in their first proclamation in the *Internationale Situationniste* #2, in December 1959: ‘Everything is to be invented.’

JDJ Exactly. There is also the fact that the situationist international involved so many artists. This was extremely exciting because I personally felt there were very few interesting young artists in Amsterdam at that time. As I always say: the situationist international was not an artistic movement; it was a movement in which both artists and art itself played an active role – at least in the early days [1957–62]. The split between the social/political and aesthetic factions had not yet occurred.

I went to SPUR’s first solo exhibition and thought it was fantastic. The group produced a magazine, which was fabulous. It was very visual, alive with drawings, quite expressionistic: it was absolutely the opposite of what was going on in the art scene at the time, which was groups like zero.





ABOVE LEFT  
*Upstairs-Downstairs*,  
1985, oil on canvas,  
2 × 1.6 m. Courtesy:  
the artist and Château  
Shatto, Los Angeles

ABOVE RIGHT  
Poster in support  
of the Paris student  
protests, 1968.  
Courtesy: the artist

RIGHT  
*Crispy Hands*, 1977,  
oil on canvas,  
1.3 × 1.8 m. Courtesy:  
the artist and Château  
Shatto, Los Angeles



AS There was also the situationist exhibition that was due to have taken place at the Stedelijk in 1960.

JDJ I met Debord for the first time when he was in discussions with Sandberg about the show. It was going to be called 'A Labyrinth' and would have involved taking down walls and cutting through things and having works all across the city, as well as in the museum. The exhibition didn't happen: in the end, I don't think either side really wanted to do it. There was also some question of funding; part of the money was to come from royal funds, which the situationists were absolutely against.

Nevertheless, you could say that it was an important precursor to the two 'radical' exhibitions, curated by Pontus Hultén, at the Stedelijk in 1961 and 1962. Both 'Bewogen Bewging' [Moving Movement] and 'Dylaby' involved movement and participation – a kind of choreography of the viewer. In fact, 'Dynamic Labyrinth' was a term that had first been used by Constant in the *Internationale Situationniste* in relation to his 'New Babylon' project [1959–74]. For a long time, I think the situationist proposal was overshadowed by the myth of Hultén, who curated both exhibitions, but now it is being discussed again.

AS That was how you were conscripted into the movement?

JDJ At almost exactly this moment, the Dutch section of the situationist international was expelled. One of them, an architect, had accepted a commission to build a church, which was, of course, out of the question. I received an extraordinary letter from Debord in which he said: 'Tout la Hollande est à vous.' [Holland is all yours.] It didn't last very long because I left for Paris the following year but, for a short time, I was the Dutch section of the situationists.

AS What was your first impression of Debord?

JDJ I was fascinated. Absolutely. At that stage, Debord was still very, very humorous – and also a lot of fun. I was very much in agreement with his ideas. But later ... Do what the chief says? No, not really. I never did.

AS Why were you expelled from the group in 1962?

JDJ I was in solidarity with Gruppe SPUR. It was very simple. The magazine was on trial in Germany for blasphemy and pornography but, instead of defending it, Debord, Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem made a pamphlet denouncing the group. They said the magazine was financed by a capitalist, which was absolutely ridiculous because this capitalist was the same big collector that bought all of Jorn's paintings. And Jorn financed the situationists. I mean, it was hilarious: so totalitarian – and totally hypocritical. I sided with Gruppe SPUR and so did the Scandinavians, and that was that.

AS You made *The Situationist Times* as a response to your exclusion.

JDJ I had suggested making an English-language situationist publication at a situationist conference in 1960. I was to edit it with Alexander Trocchi – who, at the time, was in prison on drugs charges – but it didn't happen. In the event, half of the first issue is about our exclusion; the other part is about the trial of Gruppe SPUR.

The point, for me, was to offer a platform for publishing things that couldn't be disseminated anywhere else. Even though I had been excluded from the movement, I was still very much sympathetic to its ideals and motivations. We had all sorts of contributors: theatre designers, composers, artists. I asked Noël Arnaud, who had made *Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* [with Jorn] in 1946, to be my partner. And I designed it, including the typography, and printed it in Holland.

AS Did you have any contact with Debord after that?

JDJ No. I was cut off completely, forever. Much later on, Michèle Bernstein and I – who had, after all, been the

only two women in this supposedly radically 'egalitarian' movement – became very close friends.

AS You made six issues of *The Situationist Times* between 1962 and 1967.

JDJ Yes. From number three onwards, which is when I stopped working with Arnaud, each issue was themed: knots, labyrinths, rings and chains, and explored how these forms recur across cultures and throughout history. I was still very much thinking about the *dérive* and topology. I had also been influenced by the lettrist international publication *Potlatch* [1954–57], which I had come across in Paris when I was still working at Dior.

AS Why did you stop publishing the magazine?

JDJ Money. Bankruptcy. The usual. I was preparing the seventh issue, which was to be on the subject of wheels, but I couldn't pay the bookbinder. As you know: no money, no funny.

AS Then came the events of June 1968. You had been living in Paris for many years at that point: what was your involvement in the protests?

JDJ I marched, of course, like people are marching now. I made posters. I was renting a studio from Antonio Berni in which there was a lino press and, when the student movement began, some Argentine friends and I started to make protest posters. They were anonymous; we would take them down to the Academy on rue des Beaux-Arts and, from there, they were distributed all over town.

I had to pass by the CRS [French riot police] on my way from the studio because Julio Le Parc, who had been expelled from France as he had been caught in the strike at the Renault factory, was living and working upstairs. I had to charm the police to get through: it worked, of course!

In a way, this felt like the most important work I have ever done. It was the realization of all of the situationist principles and the political ideals of the groups that I had been involved with.

AS How did it end?

JDJ The Communist Party came out against the students and told the workers not to support them. That was pretty

*The Enigma of the Shy 'Red Barron'*, 2017,  
oil stick on canvas,  
90 × 62 cm. Courtesy:  
the artist and  
onestar press, Paris





*Pommes de Jong*  
(De Jong Potatoes,  
detail), 2008–11, dried  
potatoes, 18-carat gold  
plating. Courtesy:  
the artist and Château  
Shatto, Los Angeles



“I found some old potatoes in the cellar of my house. They looked like long-haired cats. I thought: I have to do something with these!”

JACQUELINE DE JONG

much the end of it. We felt immensely betrayed. It was three weeks of total euphoria – such a feeling of possibility – and after came a huge hangover. Complete disillusionment. In a way, it was also the beginning of the end of my relationship with Jorn; it was the moment at which I realized that he was of a different generation. He didn’t want to be involved (although he did also make posters in support of the students); he said he had already been through the Spanish Civil War.

AS You were together for a decade, until the end of 1969.  
JDJ He was my tutor, in a way. He didn’t want to be, but there you are: the first influence on my art is very much his. He taught me the use of colour – I couldn’t have had a better teacher.

AS In 2015, you published *The Case of the Ascetic Satyr: Snapshots from Eternity*. It’s a collection of – I don’t want to call it correspondence, it’s more like jottings or love notes, between you and Jorn.

JDJ It is an assemblage of the funny little comments and observations we scribbled to one another over the years, which I kept hold of. They’re symptomatic of our relationship: being very much together but also completely autonomous. Jorn always said that we should make them into a book. It never happened, of course, but when I donated my archive to the Beinecke Library at Yale University, they were very interested in having them and it seemed like the moment to produce a facsimile. The book also includes a series of woodcuts that I made in Paris in 1962, when I was in the workshop of S.W. Hayter, Atelier 17, studying etching.

AS What is an ‘ascetic satyr’?

JDJ I don’t know. Jorn?

AS Who else has been an important influence on your work?

JDJ Max Beckmann for construction. Hercules Seghers for etching. Dada. Rembrandt van Rijn, of course – the obvious things. When I was growing up, I made paintings very much in the style of Nicolas de Staël. I saw a De Staël work in Oslo the other day; the colours are so incredibly strong, so brilliant, and I thought: that’s marvellous. I still think so. My style of painting has changed a great deal over the years but it has always been about those two ingredients: colour and form.

AS Tell me about your latest series of paintings [‘Potato Blues’, 2016–17], which were recently shown at onestar press in Paris.

JDJ It all started in 2003, when I found some old potatoes in the cellar of my house in France with these crazy sprouts growing all over them. They looked a little bit like long-haired cats: they were absolutely weird. I thought: this is art; I have to do something with these! I used them to make an installation at the Van Abbemuseum when I was invited by [the young Dutch artist] Jennifer Tee to participate in her show there. I called it *Potato Language* [2003] because it reminded me of the Inca knot language that I had used in issue three of *The Situationist Times*. The new ‘Potato Blues’ works are made from a series of black and white photographs of potatoes that I blew up, transferred to canvas and overpainted. They have funny titles, which reference the different kinds of potatoes: *The Enigma of the Shy ‘Red Barron’* [2017], for instance.

AS What about your *objets d’art*, the ‘Pommes de Jong’ [De Jong Potatoes, 2005–ongoing]?

JDJ I was asked by a collector to make something for her – a *bijou d’artiste* – and the idea came to me to gold-plate the potatoes.

AS I love the thought that they are very seductive, beautiful items, which are also ...

JDJ Nasty. I think they’re a little bit like shrunken heads.

AS There’s something very humorous about coating an utterly mundane potato in gold.

JDJ Ah, but the potato is very enigmatic! It reproduces underground and yet it also has flowers and seeds. I’m not quite sure how it all works and I don’t think I want to know: people will think I am totally obsessed by potatoes, which I really am not.

AS What projects would you still like to realize?

JDJ I have just opened a show at Château Shatto in Los Angeles, which is almost like a mini-retrospective. After that – I can reveal my secret to you – I’m going to make issue seven of *The Situationist Times*. Not as a magazine, but as an exhibition. It’s going to be themed around pinball. In the mid-1970s, I was here in Amsterdam compiling a sort of archive on pinball, which everyone was absolutely crazy about at the time. I was making silkscreens of pinball machines; sometimes, I even rented them to have in the gallery during my exhibitions. I have always thought that the pinball machine is extremely topological.

Also, now that my archive is at the Beinecke Library, I would very much like to have the whole of *The Situationist Times* digitized and available online. I think, at this moment in particular, we need to be reminded to be disobedient ●

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JACQUELINE DE JONG is based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In 2016, she had a solo exhibition at Galerie Clemens Thimme, Karlsruhe, Germany, and her work was included in ‘Human Animals: The CoBrA Art Movement and Its Legacy’, at University Museum of Contemporary Art, UMass, Amherst, USA, and ‘Intimate Wine Reception’ at Château Shatto, Los Angeles, USA. In early 2017, onestar press, Paris, France, presented her ‘Potato Blues’ paintings while her current solo show at Château Shatto, ‘Imaginary Disobedience’, runs until 18 May. Later this year, her ‘Pommes de Jong’ will be shown at Elisabetta Cipriani, London, UK, and Galerie MiniMasterpiece, Paris.