

Whatever our failures on the grand scale, each of us can appropriate our own space, make the world in a small way what we desire it to be. Out of what might seem at first to be a chaos of debris and odds and ends, Jorn had succeeded in making a complex and unified work.



Jeremy Hunt

Casa Asger Jorn

*Jorn... had transposed a group of vernacular buildings overlooking the sea by turning them into a kind of ceramic garden, with painted sculptures, mosaic tiles, murals of found materials and so on, together, of course, with beds and pots of flowers.*¹

The Danish artist and aesthetic theorist Asger Jorn (1914-1973) was an exponent of the Situationist International idea of Homo Ludens, proposed by Johan Huizinga in 1938, of 'Play Theory' - transforming "the whole of life into an exciting game." A photograph of Jorn on a Lambretta moped driving over wet clay at the Fabbrica San Giorgio in Albissola for his ceramic *Aarhus Panel*, 1959, captures the playful and anarchic spirit of the artist. And as an expression of Jorn's dictum that, "The experimental artist can and should take hold of industry, and submit it to non-utilitarian ends."

The Casa Asger Jorn is situated high above Albissola Marina, a resort on

the Italian Riviera in north west Italy, with a panoramic view over the Ligurian Sea.² Jorn bought the plain rustic stone building in 1957 and the adjacent property in 1959 to create a house and atelier with two acres of garden and large circular water reservoir. The Casa is a product of 'collective play', displaying a random and unstructured quality of unfinished home improvement, renovated, decorated and cultivated with the help of Umberto Gambetta, a builder, and his wife Teresa who shared the house with the Jorn's family. Over fifteen years the modest Casa Jorn was developed quixotically, invoking *Le Palais Idéal*, 1897, of the Facteur Cheval, and the eccentric monumental extravagance of the castle at Lindendorf of the 'Märchenkönig', King Ludwig II of Bavaria and Gaudi's Park Guell and Sagrada Familia Gaudi in Barcelona. The Casa Jorn is more of a domestic palace, aggrandised with outside and inside walls covered by painted tiles, plaster reliefs, scallop shells, pebbles, and an additional domestic touch included a bath dotted with ceramic turds. As Guy Debord, a long time collaborator in the Situationist International noted in *L'Architecture sauvage* (Wild



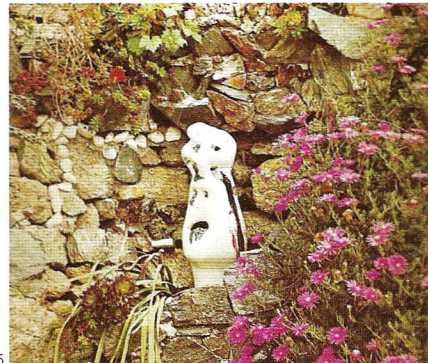
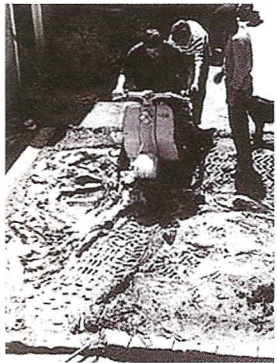
Architecture) a catalogue about Jorn/Le Jardin d'Albisola, 1973, "*Jorn had shown what could be done with 'just a little time, a little luck, enough good health, enough money, some thought, and also, some good humour.'*"³ The garden twists and winds up and down different levels with sculpture and pots in niches, and patterned steps, paths and pavements made with recycled shards and tiles, to create shaded viewing points and terraces in an eclectic and enthusiastic merger of art and horticulture. Reflecting on the garden in *L'Architecture sauvage*, Guy Debord commented that, "*whatever our failures on the grand scale, each of us can appropriate our own space, make the world in a small way what we desire it to be. Out of what might seem at first to be a chaos of debris and odds and ends, Jorn had succeeded in making a complex and unified work.*"

There had been adversarial debate between the Situationists and what they considered to be repressive systems of architecture. Contant Nieuwenhuys' (1920-2000) New Babylon, a life-long idea developed through a series of models, collages and writings, proposed a fluctuating city based on social interaction and mobility. Jorn had worked in Le Corbusier's atelier in Paris, painting murals for the Temps Nouveaux pavilion, 1937. Ten years later in a cloaked complement he declared, "*Le Corbusier studies nature the way the devil reads the Bible.*"

Later, in the early 1960s Jorn was involved in a proposition for an

experimental city, to be named Utopolis, located on an uninhabited island off the south coast of Italy. This related to Nieuwenhuys and the Situationists' programme of 'unitary urbanism,' and participation in random and contrary approaches to urban living involving psychogeography, detournement and industrial painting in opposition to the rationalist idea of urbanism as a functional framework for living. This was both a critique of Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. Instead Jorn proposed "*an artistic way of working, in which all branches of art cooperate in an organic "art of unity."*"⁴ The cultural theorist Peter Wollen, stresses that the theory of 'unitary urbanism' was based on the unit of individual. "*Jorn's underlying claim was that 'the framework for living' was not one that could be imposed from outside, externally, by city planners and architects. It had to be built in co-operation with the inhabitants of the city themselves, whose free input was needed, just as the skeleton needed the muscles and the stalk the sap.*"⁵

In 2004-2005 Culture 2000 supported a project, 'Cultural Heritage of Casa Jorn Albissola: An embodiment of Europolitan ideas', led ironically by the Bauhaus University, Weimar. This had the objective "*to illustrate, highlight and promote the "Europoliticism" through research and exposition of Casa Jorn and its artist Asger Jorn as an archetype of cultural heritage.*" A series of workshops, conference, exhibitions and a publication, focussed on Casa Jorn as, "*a cultural heritage of art, architecture and landscape, which stands as the embodiment of 'the*

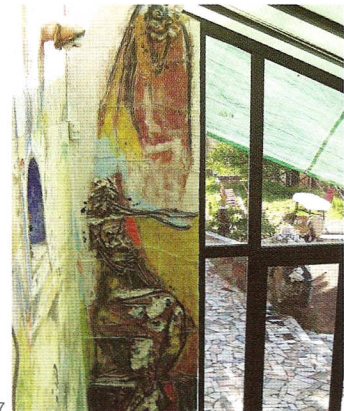


1&2 Casa Jorn
Photo: Jeremy Hunt

3 Aarhus Panel
Jorn on a Lambretta moped driving over wet clay, Fabbrica San Giorgio, Albissola
Photo:

4&5 Le Jardin D'Albisola
Jorn working on one of the Villa's murals

6-8 Casa Jorn
Photo: Allan Linnemann



1 Peter Wollen, new left review 8 March /April 2001. <http://newleftreview.org/A2315>

2 Jorn bequeathed the property, Via Gabriele D'Annunzio, 8 Albissola Marina, Italy, to Albissola to be used as an artist's house and gallery.

3 Ibid Wollen. Alberico Sala and Guy Debord. *L'Architecture sauvage* Jorn/Le Jardin d'Albisola, 1973

4 Peter Wollen. new left review 8 March/Apr il 2001. <http://newleftreview.org/A2315>

5 ibid Peter Wollen

idea of trans-national European culture', but has been abandoned to decay." As Joan Ockham notes, "The dwelling remains a demonstration of the idea that all emotionally resonant architecture, like all politics, is ultimately local."⁶

Albissola Marina - Free Republic of the Arts

Albissola Marina is renowned for its ceramic tradition and workshops, recognized from the Renaissance onwards as a centre for polychrome vases, blue and white pharmacy jars and pottery traded throughout the world. During the 1920s and 1930s cadres of writers and artists, including the Futurist group, met in Albissola, and collaborated with the local ceramics workshops to make experimental pottery. It was described by Marinetti as a 'Free Republic of the Arts' and inspired the *Futurist Manifesto of Ceramics and Aeroceramics*. In the 1950s the town and its artisanal ceramic studios attracted artists - Picasso, Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, Wifredo Lam, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Baj, as well as the European avant-garde artists associated with the Situationist International, and members of the CoBrA group - Guillaume Corneille, Karel Appel and Asger Jorn.⁷ In 1954 Jorn, Baj and others initiated the Bauhaus of Imagination, (Laboratorio Sperimentale de Movimento Internazionale per una Bauhaus imaginista) (M.I.B.I.) The 'Bauhaus of Imagination' opposed Max Bill's Bauhaus Academy (Hochschule für Gestaltung) in Germany and the functional design and mass production of objects as elitist and alienating from contemporary life. The aesthetic

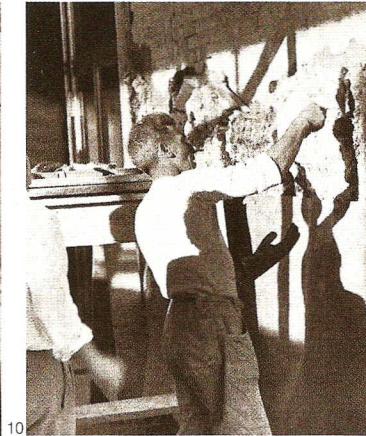
of M.I.B.I proposed instead, a human, spontaneous and expressive collective activity of painters, poets, ceramicists and architects, to cross the lines between fine art, design, craft and manufacturing, to exchange the studio for the streets, to end the separation between culture and everyday life, and reintegrate art with the environment.

Albissola is an open-air museum with artwork displayed throughout its streets, parks, lido and the seafront promenade. The Artists' Walk (Via Lungomare degli Artisti), initiated in 1963, is a long ceramic mosaic promenade made up of twenty 10 x 5 metre rectangular floor panels and c. 5 million tiles, with designs by Lam, Sassu, Fontana, Capogrossi, Fabbri, Crippa, Garelli, Luzzati, De Salvo, Strada, Sabatelli, Rosello, Caldanzano, Gambetta, Rambaldi, Porcu, Franchini, Salino, Siri and Quartini. The artists's panels consist of small triangular polychrome tiles with a chequerboard pattern of white and sky blue square tiles in the connecting panels along the seafront public walkway. This was extended in 2001 with the Eugenio Montale Promenade, including works by Emanuele Luzzati, Kristian Hornsleth, Walter Boj, Bili Bidjocka, Corrado Levi, Gian Paolo Parini and Franco Raggi.

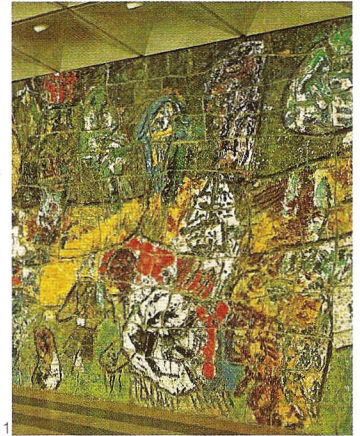
Freestanding artworks are placed long the promenade including pieces by Lucio Fontana and Leoncillo Leonardi. And the open-air gallery expands with both small scale sculpture and public seating with *Onda*, (Wave) 2005, a 120 metre-long brickwork bench, decorated with grès



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⁶ Joan Ockman Asger Jorn's *Wild Architecture*. *Architecture Magazine*: 2006-08-01

⁷ 20th century artists and writers who lived and worked in Albissola included: Alfredo Fabbri, Sergio Dangelo, Emilio Scanavino, Gigi Caldanzano, Salvatore Fancello, Aligi Sassu, Milena Milani, Agenore Fabbri, Angelo Del Bon, Roberto Crippa, Ivos Pacetti. Writers - Giuseppe Ungaretti, Salvatore Quasimodo, Eugenio Montale and Camillo Sbarbaro.

tiles by Aurelio Caminati, Carlos Carlè and Emanuele Luzzati and Galatea's *Joy and Delights*, 2007, a 40 metre-long semicircular bench with hand painted ceramic tiles by Ignazio Moncada.

Albissola and the province of Savona, in common with most traditional ceramic manufacturing centres, has a significant and respected heritage reflected in the Museum collections side by side with the fragmented remnants of a commercial industry. An attempt to reinterpret the role of ceramic production, inspired by the 20th century avant-garde tradition, was proposed by the *Attese: Biennale di Ceramica nell'Arte Contemporanea*, organized by Tiziana Casapietra, and Roberto Costantino.⁸ Their objective was to bring "contemporary artists, curators, art historians and critics with established international reputations into contact with this local and multicultural tradition and to develop a process of reciprocal metamorphosis."⁹ The Biennale echoed Situationist thinking in opposing cultural uniformity and globalization and was centred around the concept of 'Glocal' production, involving experimentation and a rethinking the territorial context of ceramics. The Biennale commissioned international artists from nations including Argentina, Cuba, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Korea, Iran and Serbia who worked on-site with local ceramic workshops and craftsmen with the aim to revitalize the creative process, to produce work on a human scale, with reference to local tradition and specific location.

Debord in his essay *L'Architecture sauvage*, described the Casa Jorn as an "inverse Pompeii: the outlines of a city which has not yet been born" and the 'Outsider' garden can be seen as a physical microcosm of the ambitions and theories of Situationist architecture and urban space, which are essential and relevant to contemporary debates on ownership and design of public space.

Jeremy Hunt

Notes

:I am greatly indebted to Tiziana Casapietra, and to Allan Linnemann for supplying information and photographs. www.cobra.li/Jornvilla.html
 Troels Andersen's biography Asger Jorn 1914-1973 (2001)
 Sally O'Reilly. How Does Your Garden Grow? Frieze, 75. March 2003
 Sally O'Reilly. 2nd Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art. Frieze, 81. 2004
 Joan Ockman Asger Jorn's Wild Architecture. Architecture Magazine: 2006-08-01
 Asger Jorn i Italien. Værker i keramik, bronze og marmor 1954 - 1972 (Asger Jorn in Italy. Works in ceramics, bronze and marble 1954 - 1972) with texts in Danish and German published in connection with the exhibition at Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Gudenåvej 7-9, DK 8600 Silkeborg, Denmark. February 17 - April 19, 2007, selected Dr Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus.



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9&12 Albissola Mural
 Jorn and others checking part of the mural

10&11 Aarhus mural for Statschool, 1968, Virtus Shade

13, 15 &16 Albissola Marina
 Photo: Jeremy Hunt

14 Longomare degli artisti
 Albisola Marina.
 Carola Merello

8 Biennale di Ceramica nell'Arte Contemporanea, October 19-20, 2002 (1st Edition)

9 Attese: Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art International exhibition, September 27 - November 9, 2003 (2nd edition)