

Jacqueline de Jong: A Situationist in the Stedelijk Museum

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In 1958, Jacqueline de Jong (1939-) moved to the city of Amsterdam, which is the setting of this narrative. There, the 19-year-old De Jong was hired as a part-time assistant at the Stedelijk Museum. While working with the collection of applied arts at the museum and taking classes in art history at the university, she was catapulted into the Amsterdam art world. De Jong proceeded to become an internationally renowned painter and a well-known member of the Situationist International. She also founded and edited the influential *Situationist Times*, an international, English-language periodical. The archive on the six issues that were published was recently acquired by Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.



Paintings by Jacqueline de Jong at the exhibition: *Pinball Wizard. The Work and Life of Jacqueline de Jong*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (9 feb t/m 18 aug 2019). Photograph by author.

The Situationist International was a politically oriented artists' movement that was primarily based in Paris. Its main protagonist was the French philosopher, filmmaker, and writer Guy Debord. The movement soon developed a Dutch section which included the artists Constant Nieuwenhuys and Armando (albeit briefly) as well as architects Har Oudejans and Anton

Alberts. While working at the Stedelijk Museum, De Jong befriended these Dutch members. The Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Willem Sandberg, was in consultation with Debord and the Dutch situationists to discuss the possibility of a Situationist International exhibition in Amsterdam. To explore the dynamics between the Stedelijk Museum, the new international avant-garde movement, and the young artist-to-be, this article investigates the short period between 1958 and 1960 in which De Jong was employed at the Stedelijk Museum, and the Situationist International was planning an Amsterdam manifestation.

The situationists in Amsterdam

In the summer of 1957, three artistic avant-garde movements gathered for a conference in Corsio d'Arroscia, a small town in Italy. It was at this meeting, the three movements merged into one: the *Internationale Situationniste* (English translation: the Situationist International). Debord, a founding member and the self-proclaimed leader of the movement, wrote the text "Rapport sur la construction de situations," which, after much debate among the members, functioned as a manifesto of the Situationist International. The first sentence reads, "Nous pensons d'abord qu'il faut changer le monde." With a focus on creating maximum societal freedom, they understood life should be one endless creative festival. According to Debord, a fundamental ingredient for such change was the construction of situations. All of the other ideas and abstract concepts that were fundamental to the situationists' aims, which included the supersession of philosophy, the realization of art, the abolition of politics, and the fall of the market mechanism, were related to this central idea of constructing situations to disrupt the societal system.

One such situation was meant to take place in Amsterdam in 1960. At this time, Sandberg discussed the possibility of organizing an exhibition with the situationist and painter Pinot Gallizio to display his industrial painting. With the interference of Debord, the plan quickly shifted toward a situationist manifestation. The Dutch section of the Situationist International was asked to create a staging for the display of works by Gallizio. The Situationist International was allotted galleries 36 and 37, which were two of the larger rooms on the second floor of the museum, and granted full freedom to create their own unique exhibition. Together with the Danish painter Asger Jorn, who had recently started a romantic relationship with Jacqueline de Jong, Nieuwenhuys and Debord assumed the lead in organizing the exhibition. In January of 1960, the situationists were ready to present Sandberg with their plans for the situationist manifestation. They wanted to transform the two galleries into a large labyrinth. The circuit could theoretically range from two hundred meters to three kilometers, as visitors were supposed to get lost. The height of the ceiling would be five meters at some points, 2.44 meters at others, and, in certain places, as low as 1.22 meters. The labyrinth would have a mixed environment wherein characteristics of the interior of a furnished apartment would be combined with urban exterior features. When a visitor walked through the exhibition, he or she would encounter a strange combination of "intérieur-extérieur," as Debord wrote to Nieuwenhuys, which could be achieved by

combining this apartment-like staging with artificial weather, such as rain, fog, and wind. Visitors would also pass through adapted thermal and luminous zones, and sound interventions would be created with speech and other noises on tape records. Furthermore, the placement of unilateral doors increased the likelihood that visitors would become lost in the labyrinth. The purpose of this installation was to create an environment wherein people could embark on a *micro-dérive*.

The practice of *dérive*, which entailed experimental walks through varied urban ambiances, was important to the Situationist International. Small groups of situationists organized these experimental walks, which offered a way to study the conditions of urban society. Furthermore, they were necessary to develop their concept of “psychogeography,” which refers to the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviors of individuals. Besides the *micro-dérive* within the museum, the situationists also planned to organize *dérives* through the city of Amsterdam. Two groups, each containing three situationists, would *dérive* for three days without leaving the city center. They would use walkie-talkies, if possible, to remain in contact with not only each other but also the radio truck of the cartographic team. As the director of the *dérive*, Nieuwenhuys would also prepare experiments at certain locations and secretly arranged events. During an interview, De Jong revealed that the *dérive* through Amsterdam was her favorite part of the manifestation.

Although the plans for the exhibition had been concretized, the relationship between the situationists and the Stedelijk Museum changed drastically in the spring of 1960. Financial discussions and the need for approval of the labyrinth by the Amsterdam fire brigade had caused problems. For instance, the situationists felt that Sandberg had interfered excessively with the plans for the exhibition. The director had suggested applying for funding from the Prins Bernhard Fonds to cover the extra expenses. However, this proposal was not an option for the situationists, as accepting money from a royal fund was in complete opposition to their principles. In the same spring, the situationists and Sandberg met on one final occasion at which the situationists reported that they would no longer be organizing the exhibition at that or any future point. In the summer of 1960, the Stedelijk Museum opened the exhibition on the basis of the initial idea: to present the industrial painting by Pinot Gallizio.

Jacqueline de Jong between the Stedelijk and the situationists

While Sandberg and the situationists were devising plans for the manifestation in Amsterdam, De Jong was working on other exhibitions within the museum. During her interview with Sandberg, De Jong mentioned that she had limited knowledge of applied arts; however, she was highly adept at languages, as she was proficient in Dutch, English, French, and German. Because her father was a collector of contemporary art, and she had accompanied him on several visits to artists, she was familiar with relevant contemporary artistic movements. Sandberg knew De Jong from a young age, as he was well acquainted

with her father. The Stedelijk director decided to offer De Jong the position on the condition that she would follow classes in art history by Dr. Hans Jaffé, who was a lecturer at the university as well as the Deputy Director of the Stedelijk Museum.

One of the first tasks that De Jong executed at the museum was to catalogue the bibliophile collection. This assignment promptly led to De Jong's infamous action of starting to cut open all the bibliophile books because she did not know that these books were supposed to remain closed. Sandberg responded to this action in positive terms, telling her that at least they knew now which books they had in the museum collection. De Jong also assisted with preparations for exhibitions. For instance, she worked for the exhibition of Danish designer Arne Jacobsen in the early summer of 1959. A few months later, she helped prepare a large display of Swedish industrial design.

De Jong's role combined several functions within the museum. Through her proceedings as a press officer, she met the artist Armando, who was a reporter for the *Haagse Post* at the time. Armando initiated contact between De Jong and other Dutch situationists by inviting her to the house of Nieuwenhuys in the summer of 1959. Nieuwenhuys' home was the site of many discussions about the situationist cause. De Jong was likely present at conversations about the planning of the exhibition. She also encountered Gruppe SPUR, which had emerged as the German branch of the Situationist International, in April of 1959. Later that same year, De Jong traveled to Kassel with her parents to visit the second Documenta. There, she met its founder, Arnold Bode, and his daughter, the artist E.R. (Renee) Nele, whom she had also met previously at the Stedelijk Museum. Nele introduced De Jong to members of Gruppe SPUR, and De Jong was immediately attracted to the group's ideas, subsequently joining the movement herself.

De Jong maintained contact with situationists through her job at the Stedelijk Museum as well as her personal friendships with members. Furthermore, she was in a romantic relationship with the Danish painter and situationist Asger Jorn. De Jong had met Jorn for the first time on February 3, 1958 – her 19th birthday – when she accompanied her father to buy one of Jorn's paintings. However, it was not until May of 1959, when De Jong was employed at the Stedelijk Museum, that De Jong and Jorn became lovers. Their relationship continued until the end of the 1960s.

While maintaining numerous and diverse connections to the Situationist International and simultaneously working at the Stedelijk Museum, De Jong found herself at the center of the Dutch section of the Situationist International. Since the Stedelijk Museum was a hierarchical institution in the late 1950s, De Jong had no influence over the organization of the exhibition, as she stated firmly during an interview, though she has admitted to sharing information and insights with Jorn that she had gathered from Sandberg. De Jong rarely interfered with the exhibition that the situationists were planning, as she was focused on her

own work at the Stedelijk Museum; nonetheless, she realized that an exciting development was underway, which piqued her curiosity. The idea of the *dérive* was especially fascinating to her. De Jong occasionally joined *dérives* later in her life, and such engagement influenced her work as an artist and with the *Situationist Times* in particular. De Jong published the first issue of this periodical in 1962 and intended it as a complementary magazine to *Internationale Situationniste* and *SPUR*, the French and German periodicals. De Jong's *Situationist Times* approached the concept of a magazine from a completely novel angle, as its primary concern was the logic and concepts that could be discovered in and presented through the proliferation of images within every issue. This rather associative printing of images around a certain topic is, like a *dérive*, an experimental form of studying a certain topic or thought process. Notably, the fourth issue of the *Situationist Times* was dedicated to the labyrinth.

De Jong had been exposed to contemporary art from a young age, as her father was an earnest collector who operated within a large network of artists, gallery owners, and museum directors. For De Jong, who started a job at the most important site for modern and contemporary art in the 1950s – namely the Stedelijk Museum under directorship of Sandberg – the museum was an extraordinary and inspiring place. The exposure to new developments in art and the possibility to experience works by the most profound and innovative artists of the 20th century had a major impact on the young woman, who had recently started to paint again. De Jong was particularly impressed by the work of Chaïm Soutine – especially the painting *Le Boeuf* in the Stedelijk collection. Early paintings by De Jong clearly evidence the inspiration that she derived from abstract expressionistic painters, such as Soutine.

The intertwining of De Jong's employment at the Stedelijk Museum and engagement with the situationists significantly influenced her further career. De Jong's first encounter with Debord occurred within the walls of the museum after the Dutch section of the Situationist International was expelled and the plans of the exhibition fell through. Suddenly, the Situationist International lacked a Dutch department. On July 6, 1960, Debord sent De Jong a letter with the remarkable line, "pour le moment, toute la Hollande est à vous." At this moment, Jacqueline de Jong, who was a woman of only 21 years old, became the head of the Dutch section of the Situationist International. This remarkable moment, which is highlighted by the letter of Debord, was only the starting point of De Jong's extraordinary career as an artist and situationist. After spending only two years in Amsterdam, De Jong decided to leave The Netherlands in 1960 to move to Paris. According to De Jong, because of Sandberg's politics, she had not been accepted to enroll at the Rijksacademie, which was the art academy that she had hoped to attend. However, the museum director, who was a graphic designer himself, recognized potential in her work and wrote a letter of recommendation to the graphic artist Stanley Hayter, who was located in Paris. The consequent job opportunity was attractive, especially since Jorn resided in Paris as well. In

December of 1960, De Jong left behind Amsterdam – and the many connections that she had made there – to move to Paris, which was the geographical center of the Situationist International.