

The Situationist Times. Drawing and Design of Sitology

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Abstract

The essay explores the editorial project *The Situationist Times*, a magazine published between 1962 and 1967 by Jacqueline de Jong, to investigate sitology, a kind of situationist topology. In particular, the analysis aims to delve into the role of drawing and the design strategies employed to communicate this new discipline, conceived by Asger Jorn, and treated from the third to the fifth issue. Indeed, the advent of sitology entails a radical transformation in both linguistic and compositional terms. The double pages become the setting for a labyrinthine interweaving of topological figures such as the spiral, the knot, and the ring. Encyclopedic iconographic collections allow for a morphological study that connects heterogeneous times, cultures, and disciplines. Adept at never taking a peremptory position, de Jong's sitological exploration is marked by openness and horizontality and invites the reader to active interpretation. In its extensive use of imagery, drawing sustains a propaedeutic and operative function: it introduces the theme and mediates between the photographic and textual documents, managing to combine mathematical patterns and decorative motifs of cultural-historical value. Finally, together with the recurrent use of manuscript text, it enables the project to preserve a confidential dimension and, likewise, to reveal the ultimate meaning of sitology, understanding forms from their inherent potential for metamorphosis.

Keywords: *The Situationist Times*, Jacqueline de Jong, Asger Jorn, sitology, topology

Introduction

In 1964, on the occasion of the launch of the fifth issue of the magazine *The Situationist Times* (1962-1967, hereafter *TST*) at Galerie Gammel in Copenhagen, Jacqueline de Jong (1939), the artist, editor, and graphic designer behind the project, provides a concise overview framing the trajectories covered by *TST* in its first two years of publication, in a brief welcome address. De Jong reveals some of the project's pivotal points, such as the role of topology and the significance of sitology, the magazine's polyphonic and anti-sectarian vocation, and the artistic, political, and imaginative influence exerted by situationism and pataphysics [Prestsæter 2019, pp. 189-191]. Toward the end of the reading, after presenting all the heterogeneous contributions of the issue, with insights

from architects, mathematicians, poets, historians, scholars, and artists, de Jong reports, more as mere technical data, another element worthy of attention, namely the presence of nearly eight hundred illustrations, of which about seven hundred and twenty are numbered, in the last issue of the magazine alone.

This note, seemingly devoid of resonance, is nevertheless indicative of an ambitious editorial line that privileges, through an expanded use of images, the visualization of knowledge in the extension of space rather than a vertical, verbose, closed hermeneutic. This choice is implemented with the help of a wide assortment of representational forms –such as drawing, freehand tracing, and photography– a symptomatic preference of a research that is as

focused on images as on the techniques that enable them, whereby the clash between elements occurs on several combined levels, for a fragmented and composite collage. The penchant for the visual as a tool of knowledge seems to be related to the use of topology as an object of exploration. This is used by de Jong “superficially”, filling the space of double pages with examples of invariant forms in metamorphosis. Topological inquiry seems to respond to the desire to reorient situationist thinking toward a renewed study of the situation, its constitutive notion.

TST addresses topology by extracting it from its mathematical context and using it to activate a comparative discourse that embraces different fields of culture, from art to literature, from history to architecture. De Jong’s topological inexperience ensures that the journal never comes to adopt a peremptory or ideological position, and stands as a space open to accommodate different, often even contradictory opinions, drawing an incoherent and ambiguous horizon; such that it does not provide easy definitions or systemic understandings, but nonetheless capable of generating productive comparisons and assigning maximum freedom of movement to the equally illiterate reader.

The extensive use of photographic reproductions and drawings should therefore be understood as part of a larger project of studying and applying topology, or rather, sitology, a kind of situationist topology, which de Jong explores together with the reader through the pages of *TST*, since the third issue. Guiding de Jong toward sitology is Asger Jorn, Danish artist and thinker, avant-garde spirit, former founding member of the art collective CoBrA (1948-1951), the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (1955-1957) and the Situationist International (1957-1972, hereafter SI), of which he was a member until 1961. Jorn, even before he distanced himself from SI, manifested his interest in topology, a “plastic geometry” that circumvents Euclidean binary and definitory logic, introducing instead a “geometry of variables, playful and differential” [Jorn 1960]. Defined as “the transformative morphology of the unique”, sitology accompanied Jorn’s artistic projects and theoretical reflections throughout the 1960s and finds fertile ground for introductory investigation in *TST*. This essay aims to examine more in detail the techniques through which sitology gains space within *The Situationist Times*. The research conducted so far has had the merit of illuminating the context, genesis, and language of the

magazine, the distancing from Debord’s “official” situationism, the playful, labyrinthine, and subversive use assigned to topology, and Jorn’s influence on the project [Kurczynski 2011; Pollet 2011; Prestsæter 2019; Wark 2008, 2011]. Precisely in order to grasp from different angles the multiple philosophical and cultural reverberations that flow freely in *TST*, the essay intends to continue the recently initiated work of reactualization and to focus more specifically on the communicative strategies and the role of drawing in the iconographic galleries dedicated to topology, that allow de Jong to develop, in a continuous interplay, a mobile and relational thinking through images. In recent years, *TST* has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of academic, critical and museum interest. Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library acquired de Jong’s entire archive in 2011, containing the magazine’s original materials, maquettes, and correspondences. A year later, on the occasion of the magazine’s 50th founding anniversary, the New York curatorial platform and exhibition space Boo-Hooray dedicated a major exhibition to the project and published facsimiles of all issues [1]. More recently, researcher Ellef Prestsæter has developed a tripartite project, *These are Situationist Times* [2019], which includes an exhibition, a digitization project and a critical anthology [2]. These and other opportunities for discussion [3] have made the contemporaneity of the project even more evident. It proves relevant for the profound epistemological value devoted to topology, which today is reflected, for example, in sociological studies that address culture in topological terms [Lury et al. 2012]; and equally it proves generative for the daring graphic, typographic and linguistic contaminations, for the strenuous defense of a design-it-yourself culture, defined by de Jong as “amateur professionalism”, and for the extreme freedom of expression invoked in the name of a fundamental interrelation between fields of knowledge.

Spaces of empowerment

The first issue of *TST* was printed in Rotoprint in May 1962 in Hengelo, the Netherlands, de Jong’s hometown. Nevertheless, the idea of publishing an English-language Situationist magazine had been born two years earlier, during the fourth SI conference, held in September 1960 in London. De Jong proposed creating an “international”



Fig. 1. J. de Jong (Ed.), *The Situationist Times*, 5, back cover, 1967.

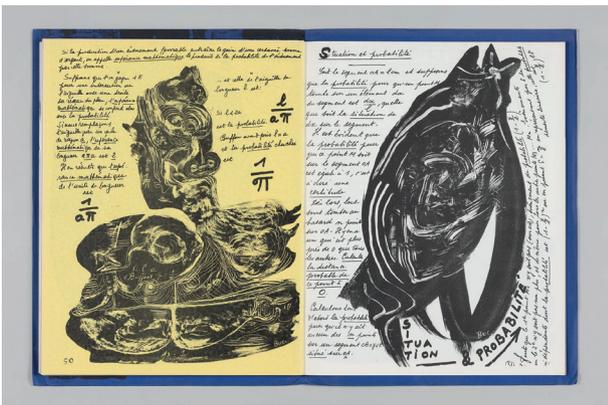


Fig. 2. J. de Jong, Critique on the Political Practice of Détournement. In J. de Jong, N. Arnaud (Eds.), *The Situationist Times*, 1, pp. 42, 43, 1962.

Fig. 3. M. Buaille, Situation & Probabilité. In J. de Jong, N. Arnaud (Eds.), *The Situationist Times*, 2, pp. 50, 51, 1962.

version to go along with the two existing journals, *Internationale situationniste* (1958-1969), produced by the French division, and *SPUR* (1960-62), produced by the German core. The journal was supposed to translate and transmit the ideas of the SI—particularly those of the French branch of the movement—into English, taken as the new European *lingua franca*. But the purpose is soon shattered: between 1961 and 1962 the German section is expelled, their magazine is accused of pornography and blasphemy by the Bavarian authorities, and the Scandinavian branch of the movement splits, led by Jørgen Nash, Asger Jorn's brother, who founds a situationist utopian Bauhaus and journal, called *Drakabygget* (dragon's den), on a farm in southern Sweden. De Jong, sympathetically aligned with the German cause, close to the playful and experimental instances promoted by Nash, and deeply disappointed by the institutional and anti-artistic hardening of IS, chooses to use *TST* as a platform to voice her disappointment, as a space for emancipation to reaffirm the original potential of situationism as a radical and anti-organizational avant-garde, founded on the strategies of “*détournement*, derive, and modification” [Prestsæter 2019, p. 16].

The first and second issues, co-edited with Noël Arnaud, a surrealist and pataphysician with already significant editorial experience [4], openly sided with the *SPUR* group in frank polemic with IS. The magazine was immediately disavowed by IS and took a circuitous and independent path that transformed as de Jong and Jorn's interests and economic fortunes evolved. Both graphically and linguistically, *TST* distanced itself from the serious, austere, and compartmentalized *Internationale situationniste* and drew on a wide range of references [5], making the most of the typographic and graphic experiences acquired by de Jong during her formative years at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, under the supervision of designer and curator Willem Sandberg (1897-1984).

“The lettering is from *The Times* and everything else was composed with characters in wood. Sandberg had influenced me in terms of the usage of wooden characters. As for the Celtic pattern, that was Jordenian, of course. I stole it from *Drakabygget*, Jørgen Nash's journal. [...] The Celtic knot is a reference to Jorn's theory of triolectics. We were both opposed to dialectics and triolectics was our alternative” [Prestsæter 2019, p. 29]. As is also evident from this reconstruction by de Jong, Jorn's role is central to the project. His contribution appears even

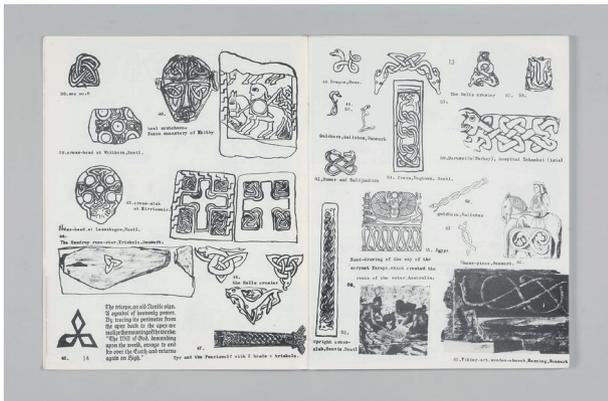
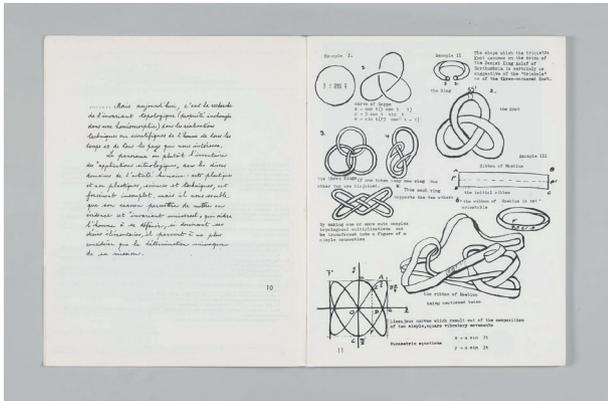


Fig. 4. J. de Jong (Ed), *The Situationist Times*, 3, pp. 10, 11, 1963.

Fig. 5. J. de Jong (Ed), *The Situationist Times*, 3, pp. 14, 15, 1963.

more significant from the third issue, when the journal chooses to devote itself entirely to sitology, with three thematic issues.

Jorn approaches topology to overcome the limitations of Euclidean geometry, which appears inadequate to understand an increasingly chaotic world and to take into account the observer's point of view. His analysis goes as far as to problematize the paradigms of Aristotelian binary logic, proposing a new tripartite logic, to which he gives the name of trielectics [Rossi 2022]. Topology allows him "the introduction of disorder and temporality into geometric thought" [Kurczynski 2011, p. 160] and soon attempts to relate it to the situationist cause. He thus suggests recovering the studies of Henri Poincaré, the father of modern algebraic topology, who speaks of it in terms of "analysis situs", which can be immediately linked to the fundamental question of (situ)ation and the labyrinth, a true situationist obsession [Burleigh 2018]. Sitology allows Jorn to move beyond general topology, toward a "visual morphology" apt to understand cultural forms from their transformation and to reread phenomena starting from a single form in constant motion that unfolds homeomorphically in infinite variations. Indeed, the double pages of *TST* become an encyclopedic display case where multiple eras and civilizations are brought into dialogue through the juxtaposition of works of art, scientific models, ritual objects, and topological patterns, such as the knot, the ring, and the spiral.

Many of the images that de Jong xeroxes, cuts out, or traces by hand come from the photographic archive of the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism (hereafter SICV), which Jorn has been developing since '61 together with French photographer Gérard Franceschi –and partly with de Jong herself– with the aim of documenting and comparing figurative and decorative motifs of the Nordic tradition with those of Romanesque and Gothic history. The counter-archive to the dominant history of Western art that SICV develops finds in *TST* a privileged space of application. Here it is enriched by numerous heterodox artistic and mathematical interventions –such as the dozen contributions by mathematician, surrealist, and pataphysician Max Bucaille– that invite a constant remixing of the elements at play. It is a constant action of rewriting and disorientation that de Jong operates in the first person and likewise urges the reader to do, as is evident from the back cover of the third and fifth issues, which reads "any reproduction, deformation,

modification, derivation and transformation of *The Situationist Times* is permitted” (fig. 1). De Jong’s topological wanderings provide a comparative arena in which the reader is not only invited to move unguided through the redundancy of the proposed connections but is also stimulated to make their own use of the materials provided by the magazine. The result is a project in which the relationships do not cease to encourage new interlacements and combinations.

Before dwelling more specifically on the communicative and design techniques used to present the topological derives of *TST*, it is worth mentioning that the project is divided into three salient phases: the first, comprising the first two issues, is still fully imbued with situationist matter –see the narrative drift of the cyclist Polydore Bouffieux that runs through the entire second issue– and linked to the political and ideological events that followed the splits of 1961 and 1962. From the third to the fifth issue, the narrative is characterized by a comparative approach, in which a myriad of images combines to form an exploratory panoramic study of sitology. The themes of the third and fourth issues are interlacing and labyrinth respectively, while the fifth focuses on rings and chains. The third phase, encapsulated in the sixth and final published issue, is notable for its use of lithography and welcomes thirty-two contributions from as many artists. Each double page hosts a color print, placed on the right side. The topographical research disappears, or rather, is suspended; in fact, de Jong would like to resume it through an issue on the wheel, of which no materials are available, and one on the pinball machine, of which a sketched mock-up exists instead [Prestsæter 2019, pp. 261-336], but unfortunately she will not be able to release any further issues, stopping at the sixth, printed in Paris in December 1967.

Strategies of narrative

The aesthetics developed by *TST* within its sitological explorations absorbs and rearticulates some instances peculiar to the Situationist avant-garde, such as détournement and psychogeography, anticipating some strategies typical of postmodernism, such as the appropriation of pre-existing materials and the overcoming of the logic of copyright, bringing critical attention back to the reader’s activity. It also recovers the art of assemblage and collage

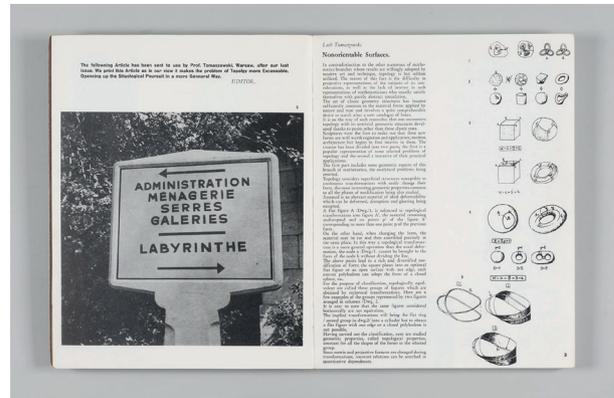


Fig. 6. L.Tomaszewski, *Nonorientable Surfaces*. In J. de Jong (Ed.), *The Situationist Times*, 4, pp. 2, 3, 1963.

Fig. 7. J. de Jong (Ed.), *The Situationist Times*, 5, pp. 152, 153, 1967.

of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes, particularly the playful and subversive use of Dada and Surrealism. The first two issues see the alternation of several types of paper and colors, such as red, blue, and yellow, and playful situationist experiments often take over – prominent among them are manuscript contributions by de Jong and Bucaille, titled respectively *Critique on the Political Practice of Détournement* (fig. 2) and *Situation and Probability* (fig. 3). A series of opaque montages of images to decipher, juxtapositions with an ironic but critical edge, also begin to appear in the second issue. Yet the use of drawing is still limited and merges with a still preponderant use of text; it remains tied to situationist psychogeography exercises and some geometric patterns. The writing is photocopied from other sources or handwritten; the rhythm is discontinuous but varied.

In the topological issues, on the other hand, black and white printing prevails, the intervention of color is minimized, and drawing becomes the protagonist. Decorative motifs, geometric patterns, topological forms, hieroglyphics, graffiti: the drawing is photographed, cut out from other volumes, xeroxed, even traced by hand and begins to fill the double pages seamlessly. It is mainly de Jong who uses tracing and freehand drawing. The choice seems on the one hand related to technological impediments and on the other indicative of a 'raft' approach to publishing that does not sympathize with the growing (ab)use of mechanical and industrial reproduction and division. Indeed, de Jong's role in the project is horizontal. She is omnipresent throughout the processes of the magazine's editing, crossing graphic, typographic and editorial skills. Her figure moves ubiquitously between directing and producing, with tasks of both coordination and supervision, as well as practical and manual enactment. Moreover, unlike what was originally assumed, de Jong chooses to publish the texts she receives directly in the language in which they are written. It is thus that the internationality of *TST* is no longer configured by the exclusive use of English, but by the combination of many European languages, such as German, French, Italian, and Danish. Where English recurs, the language is crippled and approaches a simplified English purged of many linguistic niceties [6].

From the third issue, then, the layout of the journal undergoes a substantial metamorphosis. Entire issues become patterns of sitological applications. The text recedes, until it becomes mere caption, and the image

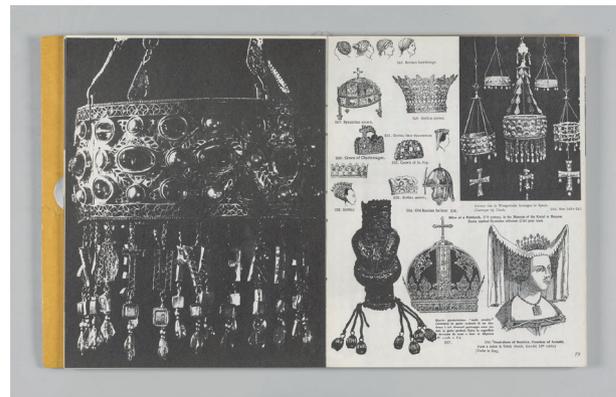
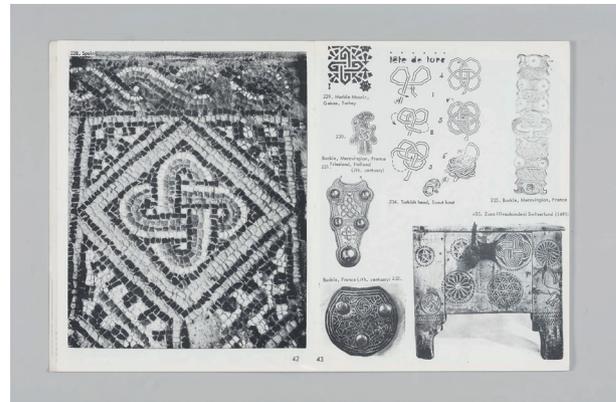


Fig. 8. J. de Jong (Ed.), *The Situationist Times*, 3, pp. 42, 43, 1963.

Fig. 9. J. de Jong (Ed.), *The Situationist Times*, 5, pp. 78, 79, 1967.

becomes the protagonist. De Jong intervenes personally, not only tracing a myriad of topological forms by hand, but also collecting many of the photographs directly from volumes in consultation at the National Library in Paris and at SICV. One bold aspect, antithetical to the spirit in which modernist design approaches mathematical rule [Falcinelli 2022, pp. XLIX-LV], is that the entire layout of the magazine seems sustained by a playful and subversive impulse. The situationist use of topology, mathematics of metamorphoses, under an apparent scientificity actually conceals an ambiguous practice that “far from being a guarantor of order, becomes an agent of confusion, an instrument of subversion” [Pollet 2011, p. 106].

It is significant to note that within the sitological discourse the different techniques of representation alternate and intertwine with each other respecting certain rhythms and balances. Take for example the incipits of the first two issues devoted to the theme. The first begins by illustrating a series of topological interlacements and non-orientable surfaces, such as the Möbius strip (figs. 4, 5). Before photographic reproduction takes over, about sixty drawings, mostly freehand, introduce the subject. The same happens in the second issue, devoted to the theme of the labyrinth. The issue opens with a praise of topology by Polish architect and theorist Lech Tomaszewski and an essay on the topology of the labyrinth by Italian artist Piero Simondo. Sequences of images flow by, most of them freely made by hand (fig. 6). This technique thus seems to possess an initiatory and propaedeutic function. Bearer of information, it allows for tracing, erasing, and editing. It belongs to a draft dimension, where the imprinted mark retains a transitory, ephemeral, undefinable character, which acquires value only when framed in an overall cartography where each element means by the relationships, similarities, and dissonances it is able to activate on the atlas.

De Jong approaches sitology by opting for a technique that is scientifically among the least rigorous. Yet this preference allows her to design directly on the page, without frames or borders, achieving a diaristic intimacy that, together with the widespread use of handwriting, makes the entire project extremely confidential. Namely, the entrance of topology takes place by privileging a figurative and experiential form of learning at the expense of a purely verbal and mnemonic one. Direct and impulsive application, sometimes with childish traits, is

preferred to documentary, objective, ethnographic photography, or mathematical formula.

In the last issue devoted to topology, however, tracing immediately gives way to Jorn's triolectics patterns. In this last topological excursion, the use of the image reaches its greatest expansion (fig. 7). Drawings and illustrations are employed mostly unframed, with transparent backgrounds, and seem to form a kind of bridge between the textual and the photographic, both of which are instead usually placed within geometric and modular frames. Their role appears as liberating as balancing. Exploratory on the one hand, especially when made by hand, mediating on the other, both in compositional and topological terms, when photocopied from other volumes. Drawing simultaneously abstracts and reifies what photography and text document, managing to link mathematical patterns to ornamental motifs of cultural-historical value. Its use provides the page with the breathing space that the black ink absorption of photographic reproduction subtracts. It is also able, as a whole, to convey to the entire investigation that plastic and metamorphic potential proper to topological form that text is unable to stimulate instead.

The single drawing is most often reserved a small space on the page, while the single photographic reproduction comes to occupy up to an entire side (figs. 8, 9). This play of scale, in which multiple small drawings occupy space and are juxtaposed with much larger photographs, is another dominant recurrence throughout the sitological issues of *TST*. But the choice does not seem to respond to a hierarchy of values. Both techniques flow freely respecting an invisible metric that juxtaposes full and empty spaces, black and white. Drawing facilitates the functioning of photography and vice versa. Their continual exchange of positions and interlocks does not allow the reader to recognize a pattern and thus produces a solicitation that finds no rest. Protagonists of an assemblage that aims to repeat itself through ever-changing forms, they succeed each other in an enigmatic alternation that disassembles and reassembles knots, interlacements, and chains. The interplay of combinations occurs without any overlap between the images. Exploited to their full extent, the double pages turn into a visual atlas that simultaneously arranges and disarticulates. The reader, disoriented by so much whirling and multilingual flow, is thrown at least one lifeline: each content is numbered, described, and finally indexed.

Conclusions

TST emerges as a project with multiple layers of interpretation, never abandoning a playful and transformative disposition, emphasizing the boundaries between the serious and the facetious. Far from attempting to fix sitology in an arid and ideological framework, de Jong succeeds in the not easy task of presenting it always in motion, never over-interpreting it and preserving the transformative potential that fuels it. The fluctuation between tracing, drawing, illustration, photography, and text –the latter often opening and closing the issues, as if to guard within it an otherwise unrestrained flow– weaves superficial but tangled threads. The intricate weave that *TST* unfolds overturns the epistemological and normative value of mathematics, now revealing a chaotic and problematic world, and invites the reader to enter the sitological labyrinth without orientation, with the goal no longer to escape from it but to welcome its constant transformation.

The essay seeks to highlight certain procedural and compositional recurrences, paying attention to the use and potential significance of certain representational techniques

in the economy of the project. The analysis hypothesizes that the use of drawing, primarily by hand, is indicative of a design practice that to the documentary verification integrates an artistic-expressive exuberance capable of contextually generating an international magazine with an encyclopedic vocation and a research notebook with a confidential and amateurish tone.

Instead, the continuous alternation of drawing and photography seems to respond, rather than to an aesthetic need, to a spatial and dialogical balance. Where photography excels in number and size, drawing carves out a mediating space between the abstraction of topological form and its cultural-historical application.

De Jong is skilled in not saturating ultra-specialized and easily soporific topics, diversifying viewpoints, and thus ensuring a fertile heterogeneity of new combinations and perspectives. Sitology does not find easy definitions and resolving interpretations; it subverts certain lines and fixed plans and introduces unpredictability and disorientation, both compositionally and epistemologically. To the reader the explicit task of metabolizing and metamorphosing a discipline that, in part, they will personally invent.

Notes

[1] The facsimiles published by Boo-Hooray are immediately disapproved by de Jong, who considers them, in several key respects, not adhering to the originals. She calls the facsimiles "Errata", <<https://www.jacquelinejong.com/internationale-situacioniste/>> (accessed 20 December 2022).

[2] The exhibition, curated by Ellef Prestsæter in collaboration with Torpedo and Jacqueline de Jong and titled *Jacqueline De Jong & The Situationist Times: Same Player Shoots Again!*, was on view at Torpedo/PUB, Oslo, 2018; Konsthall Malmö, 2019; Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Denmark, 2019; Treize, Paris, 2020. The digital project, developed in parallel, makes available the scans of all the issues of the magazine, via Monoskop <https://monoskop.org/Situationist_Times>, and a video commentary featuring de Jong herself, via the Scandinavian Institute of Computational Vandalism <<https://vandal.ist/thesituationisttimes/>>.

[3] Among the many opportunities for discussion worth mentioning are the symposium organized on January 28, 2017 at Kunsthall Oslo, titled *These are Situationist Times: A Symposium on Topology, Culture and Politics*, <<https://kunsthalloslo.no/?p=4443>>, and the exhibition *Pinball Wizard: The*

Work and Life of Jacqueline de Jong held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2019, which ended with the launch event of the volume *These are Situationist Times!* edited by Ellef Prestsæter.

[4] A hospital administrator by profession, Arnaud was editor of important avant-garde magazines, including that of the surrealist group *La Main à plume* (1941-1945) and, together with Jorn, of *Le Surréalisme révolutionnaire* (1948). Arnaud was also a member of the post-Dadaist group "Les Réverbères", satrap of the College of Pataphysics, a member of the avant-garde movement CoBrA and president of the literary group OuLiPo.

[5] In several interviews [Prestsæter 2019, pp. 31, 133; Sherlock 2017] de Jong acknowledges the influence of other journals such as *i10* (1927-29) published by the anarchist Arthur Lehning, and *Potlatch* (1954-57), a journal of the Lettrist International.

[6] Wark uses the term "netlish" to refer to a transnational English, shamelessly used as a second language that traces the writer's native language [Wark 2011, p. 116]. Prestsæter speaks instead of International Art English [Prestsæter 2019, p. 10].

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