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# Other stories: Asger Jorn's and Pierre Wemaëre's *Le Long Voyage*, 1959-1960

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## Abstract

In the autumn of 1958, the Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914-1973) received a commission for a large, coloured tapestry to be installed at the Statsgymnasium in Aarhus, Denmark. Jorn drew in his friend, the French artist Pierre Wemaëre (1913-2010), as a collaborator in this initiative. In this article, I shed light on Jorn's and Wemaëre's effort to push boundaries when producing the work. These included a challenge to disciplinary boundaries – that is, between art, craft, design and architecture – as well as social hierarchies between the artist as the creator and the weavers as the executors. The attempt was also to challenge institutional boundaries between high art and popular art, as well as professional boundaries – that is, between a spontaneous production method versus one that is based on planning combined with a division of labour. But, as I reveal through an exploration of the making of the weaving, these ideals were of necessity compromised during the process of production and, while resulting in an impressive and memorable work, the project did not ultimately challenge existing norms of creating large-scale weavings.

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**Keywords:** Asger Jorn, Pierre Wemaëre, *Le Long Voyage*.

Original Research

Themed section on Material narratives: Public and private histories in cloth

In the autumn of 1958, the Danish Cobra<sup>1</sup> Artist and co-founder of the Situationist International,<sup>2</sup> Asger Jorn (1914-1973), received a commission for a large, coloured tapestry to be installed at the Statsgymnasium in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city after the capital, Copenhagen. Today, this building, designed by Arne Gravers and Johann Richter, is considered as one of the most prominent pieces of post-World War II functionalist architecture in Denmark (Figures 1, 2). Jorn took on the challenge of creating the tapestry, together with his friend, the French artist Pierre Wemaère (1913-2010), whom he had known since the mid-1930s when they were both students in Fernand Léger's "Atelier Contemporain" in Paris. The artwork's title, *Le Long Voyage* (*Den lange Rejse* in Danish), hints at a series of novels, published between 1908-1922 by the Danish author Johannes V. Jensen, which deals with the development of humankind from the ice age to the period of Christopher Columbus. At the same time, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for the two artists' 20-year collaborative exploration of weaving.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



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Statsgymnasium Aarhus, Arne Gavers/ Johann Richter, 1958, photo: Børge Venge.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Statsgymnasium Aarhus, interior, photo: Børge Venge.

Among the many stories to be told about *Le Long Voyage*, the following one takes its point of departure from the fringes, rather than the centre. As the title of this paper implies, there is an existing context of research on this tapestry available in Denmark, as well as on an international level. The goal here is neither to document precisely how the tapestry came into being, nor to praise the artists and/or anchor the work in any specific discursive field of art history; that would only result in a compilation of existing research on the work. Instead, I aim to shed light on Jorn's and Wemaëre's efforts to push boundaries when producing the work: disciplinary boundaries between art, craft, design and architecture; social barriers such as hierarchies between the artist as the creator and the weavers as the executors of the artwork; institutional boundaries between high art and popular art and, last, professional boundaries between a spontaneous production method versus one that is based on planning combined with a division of labour. While doing this, I would also like to show Jorn's criticism of utopian tendencies of high modernism in architecture as expressed by the architect Le Corbusier, amongst others. Jorn's intention in creating a tapestry in a spontaneous, improvised manner is shown to have taken place against a backdrop in which tapestry often served a propagandistic function between the 1930s and 1960s. The novelty of this research – which was conceived for the Material

Narratives Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa in November 2019 – lies in the fact that the investigation creates a narrative by looking at the material properties of the tapestry and connects qualities in the work to statements by the two artists and explanations, as well as memories, of the weavers who worked with them. Even though it goes beyond the scope of this article to interrogate the gendering of roles in the creation of this tapestry, I briefly indicate some aspects related to it. Furthermore, I show how Jorn's ideals – especially when it comes to notions of collaboration, crediting others, and so forth, within the creative process – ended up being compromised during the process of production, and how the project ultimately failed to challenge existing norms of creating and producing large-scale weavings.

## Motivation

Particularly in France during the 1930s, around the time Jorn and Wemaëre studied in Paris, the medium of tapestry underwent a revival and was envisaged as a means of conveying political propaganda by both the left and the right. The 1937 Paris World Exhibition, "Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne", where Jorn worked as a helper to Le Corbusier, featured a prominent exhibition of French tapestry at the Musée National des Monuments Français. For the first time in French history, the Popular Front gained power. The new government joined forces with artists and intellectuals and chose the world exhibition to communicate its political agenda. The idea behind the tapestry exhibition was to revive the study of French masters of the medieval period in order, on the one hand, to distance itself from the classics and, on the other, to find an artistic language suitable for the new socio-political and cultural situation in which there was an interest in popular art.

The Algerian-born French entrepreneur Marie Cuttoli, who was interested in the relationship between art, fashion and interior decoration, played another important role in the revival of tapestry, as she had invited several artists to develop cartoons for tapestries. Their designs were subsequently produced by different manufacturers in France and exhibited in Paris, Chicago and New York in 1936. Among the artists she commissioned was Fernand Léger, Jorn's and Wemaëre's teacher. At the time Jorn and Wemaëre started in Léger's class, Léger had just returned from a trip to America, where his fascination with murals was met with great interest. Especially Jorn, a committed communist at that time, had a specific interest in murals, as he considered this a truly proletarian and social art (Andersen 2001:97). It is very likely that Jorn and Wemaëre not only witnessed the production of Léger's tapestry for Cuttoli, but were also involved in the discussion centring around tapestry as a medium.

For Léger, the tapestry incorporated the future of modern wall art. His brother in arms, the architect Le Corbusier,<sup>3</sup> would later confirm this idea when claiming that when 'The destiny of today's tapestry appears: it becomes the "Mural" of modern times ... We cannot have murals painted on the walls of our apartments. This "woolen wall" can be detached, rolled, carried under one's arm, travel hung elsewhere' (Le Corbusier 1960:sp). Undoubtedly, Léger and Le Corbusier conceived of the tapestry as a movable painting. Their attitude was typical of the works of the artists commissioned by Cuttoli, which were reduced to design only. All their tapestries were conceived as drawings or paintings and were subsequently translated into weavings in wool by artisans, not the artists themselves. Jorn (1957:44) retrospectively criticised the division between creator and executor, when stating that,

the production of these artists, ... did not get to bottom of the problem to be solved. Today, we see a conceptual and practical revolution concerning the question of the applied arts. Picasso's ceramic technique is precisely that of old pottery, except that it is inspired by the ingenious world of paintings; the same is true for Lurçat's oeuvre. The rationalization of the creative process in tapestry in Aubusson is merely a simplification, a clarification of a pre-existing state of affairs.

What is meant by a 'rationalization of the creative process', and what is implied when dismissing the Aubusson tapestry production retrospectively to 'a state of pre-existing affairs', is best demonstrated in the weaving experiments Jorn did together with Wemaëre over a period of about 15 years.

## First Weaving Experiments

In 1938, during a trip through the Norwegian countryside, Jorn and Wemaëre had encountered a farmer's wife working pieces of scrap fabric into a weave. This had fascinated them so much that Wemaëre started experimenting in this medium. Both artists had been considering a collaborative weaving back then already, but their plans were disrupted by World War II, during which Jorn remained isolated in Denmark. In order to make a living, Wemaëre had devoted himself to working with textiles and was producing textiles for the fashion company Rodier at his family retreat in Pinson, in the Normandie region. This is also where the Dane visited him during his first trip to Paris after the war and saw him weaving again. 'Wouldn't you like to join?', Wemaëre asked spontaneously, and they began experimenting on a small rug (Wemaëre 1983:sp). 'I was weaving while, at my side, Asger tirelessly commented on the work, while smoking' is how Wemaëre recalled their collaboration (Wemaëre 1983:sp). In this description, the different roles they will take on in future weaving collaborations already becomes apparent (Figure 3). Their initial idea was to copy the motif of a Peruvian textile, depicting a bird



FIGURE **N° 3**



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Jorn and Wemaere weaving, Pinson, 1946. Photo: private collection.

and some ornaments. In the end though, they could not stick to just translating the piece as it was, and soon they broke free from their sample by spontaneously incorporating a moon into the imagery. Wemaëre's wife had supposedly pointed out the beauty of the moon in the sky one night, which made them take a detour in such a way that they went astray from their original intention to just copy the pattern and instead, spontaneously added the moon.

Soon Jorn had to leave again and it would take another year before they got started on their first important collaborative weaving. Jorn, with his family of five, was then on his way to North Africa, following the footsteps of Paul Klee, an artist he knew from studying the Bauhaus books as a student, and whom he greatly admired. The journey was delayed and Jorn's family was stuck in Pinson with Wemaëre, waiting for money from the sales of a few paintings in Denmark and a visa to Tunisia. This allowed for time to develop new



FIGURE **N° 4**



Jorn and Wemaere, Pinson, 1947. Photo: Pierre Gassmann.

ideas for future textile projects, and the beginning of their first collaborative weaving, *L'oiseau dans la forêt* (*Bird in the Forest*, 2,52 m x 1,34 m) under the simplest circumstances (Figures 4, 5). And yet, even though the means were sparse, their ambitions were high. They aimed at nothing less than revolutionising the production method of this atavistic craft. Jorn (1957:44) retrospectively recalls their first real common weaving adventure,





FIGURE **N° 5**



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Jorn and Wemaere, *L'oiseau dans la forêt* (*Bird in the Forest*), 1947, weaving. Photo: Lars Bay.

When we considered creating a new kind of tapestry in 1946/47, everything was still very vague. The only aspect, we agreed on was that the distinction between idea and its materialization was insupportable. The imagery, which was created by us without a patiently elaborated cartoon, would need to develop spontaneously from the matter. Wemaère set up a loom. We started working and were weaving for a period of six month, during which we were using all kinds of threads from our surroundings. We were delighted by the result.

Their approach distinguished itself significantly from the conventional production mode of their time. Artists around Cuttoli, for example, would rely on a division of labour, according to which the artist took on the role of the creative inventor and the weaver would be reduced to the executor. Naturally, such a procedure would not allow a spontaneous reaction based upon the performance of the respective material and/or tools. Instead, it is based on detailed planning, where design and fabrication are separated, and every step of the process is fixed.

It is obvious that a collaboration between two or more artists on equal footing is impossible without a stylization based on what they have in common. The orchestration of our work was in many respects similar to that in jazz. If you work in this profession, the comparison with an organ is obvious; only here, instead of the keyboard you have colours. We never consciously considered the question of a particular style or a structured composition. One [of us] can resume work and then at some point let the other continue it without restriction or specialization. Our common structuring is therefore the immediate and unconsidered result of what we had learned at the Academy Léger from the generation before us and our joint opposition to its theories (Jorn 1958:143).

Jorn would later describe their approach as based on improvisation and material imagination.

On the one hand, their goal was to fight alienation, which they saw rooted in the division of the labour into different work steps to be performed by various people, and to prove that artistic creation was possible despite prior specialisation. On the other hand, they aimed at creating a woven artwork which was conceived based on the property of its material and the process of its production. *Bird in the Forest* pictures a sequence of rhythmic lines filled with colourful segments in between, from which creatures looking at the spectator evolve. According to an interview with Wemaëre, the initial intent of creating an absolutely spontaneous tapestry without using any kinds of specifications, provisions or instructions, had to be compromised (Kurczinski 2014:134). A simple sketch, rather than a cartoon,<sup>4</sup> was developed, according to which the two men started weaving. The piece was woven sideways, which allows the imagery to stem from the direction of the weaving process.

## Material Properties of *Le Long Voyage*

Almost a decade later, *Bird in the Forest* served as a point of departure for *Le Long Voyage*, both in terms of the artistic motif and the mode of production. Even though the multi-coloured tapestry was almost ten times as large, the idea was again to fabricate it manually on a loom. The nearly abstract imagery also evolves from a mash of back lines and segments of colour in between. Different kinds of creatures seemingly float on the surface of the tapestry. Just as in their earlier project, the idea was that the artists themselves conceive, create and produce the piece on the basis of the material property and the process of fabrication. And yet, *Le Long Voyage*, measuring 25 square metres in size, made for a much bigger challenge. Would the two men be able to finish the piece according to the standards (no division of labour between the artist as designer and the craft person as executor) they had earlier set for themselves?

Compared to *Bird in the Forest*, the imagery on *Le Long Voyage* is more dynamic; in parts even chaotic (Figure 6). It is divided into four different colour zones, each of which has its own atmospheric effect. A smaller part on the left is dominated by dark green, blue and brown tones, and is followed by a yellow, green, brown and red section in which the imagery is less compressed, more loosely distributed over the surface, and lighter and more gay in expression. The next section, characterised by tones of blue, green, brown and beige is more balanced and static, while the closing section to the right, in strong red, green, yellow and dark and light brown, marks a powerful closing point. The number of colours is striking and, owing to the combination of the nearly innumerable different colour segments, there is not one single colour thread going through the entire width of the tapestry.



FIGURE N° 6



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Jorn and Wemaere, *Le Long Voyage*, 1960, weaving. Photo: Lars Bay.

Even though the materials – wool, cotton, silk, hair – vary greatly, the thickness of the threads is fairly even, which creates a more-or-less flat surface. Some threads are in one colour and material, while others are spun together from various thinner, different colour threads. This, in combination with how dense the wool is pressed together, provides varying effects of colour and light. Thus, the density of the thread on the surface of the weaving is also implemented to achieve certain chromatic effects. When turning the tapestry and looking at it from the back, one can see that there are many threads hanging out on one end, although there are progressively fewer of them towards the other end (Figures 7, 8). Obviously, the threads have been changed more often on the side, where the piece was started, than on the other, where it ended. Was this the weavers' intention or was it a coincidence? Was it the limited amount of wool of a certain colour at the beginning or the limited variety of colours that in the end lead to this? What can be stated for certain is that the change of threads takes time and the fewer threads are changed the faster the weaving goes. Thus, such a seemingly minor detail, which is practically invisible when looking at the piece from the front, reveals something about the production speed of the tapestry.

## Artistic Collaboration

Jorn had been discussing the project for an artistic decoration of the Statsgymnasium for several years and was about to give up on it, when he was finally able to sign the contract. Since the time he worked and studied with Léger and worked with Le Corbusier on the 1937 World Exhibition, he was intrigued by the idea of a synthesis of art and architecture and theorised extensively about it. Sadly, his numerous efforts to create collaborative projects with architects in his home country during the 1940s did not lead to anything. Moreover, already in the winter of 1953-1954, he had left Denmark for good, since he could not make a living there as he received no public support. He sojourned first in Switzerland and settled finally in Italy. The weaving, together with a 30 metre long ceramic mural in the aula of the gymnasium, was his first large public commission in

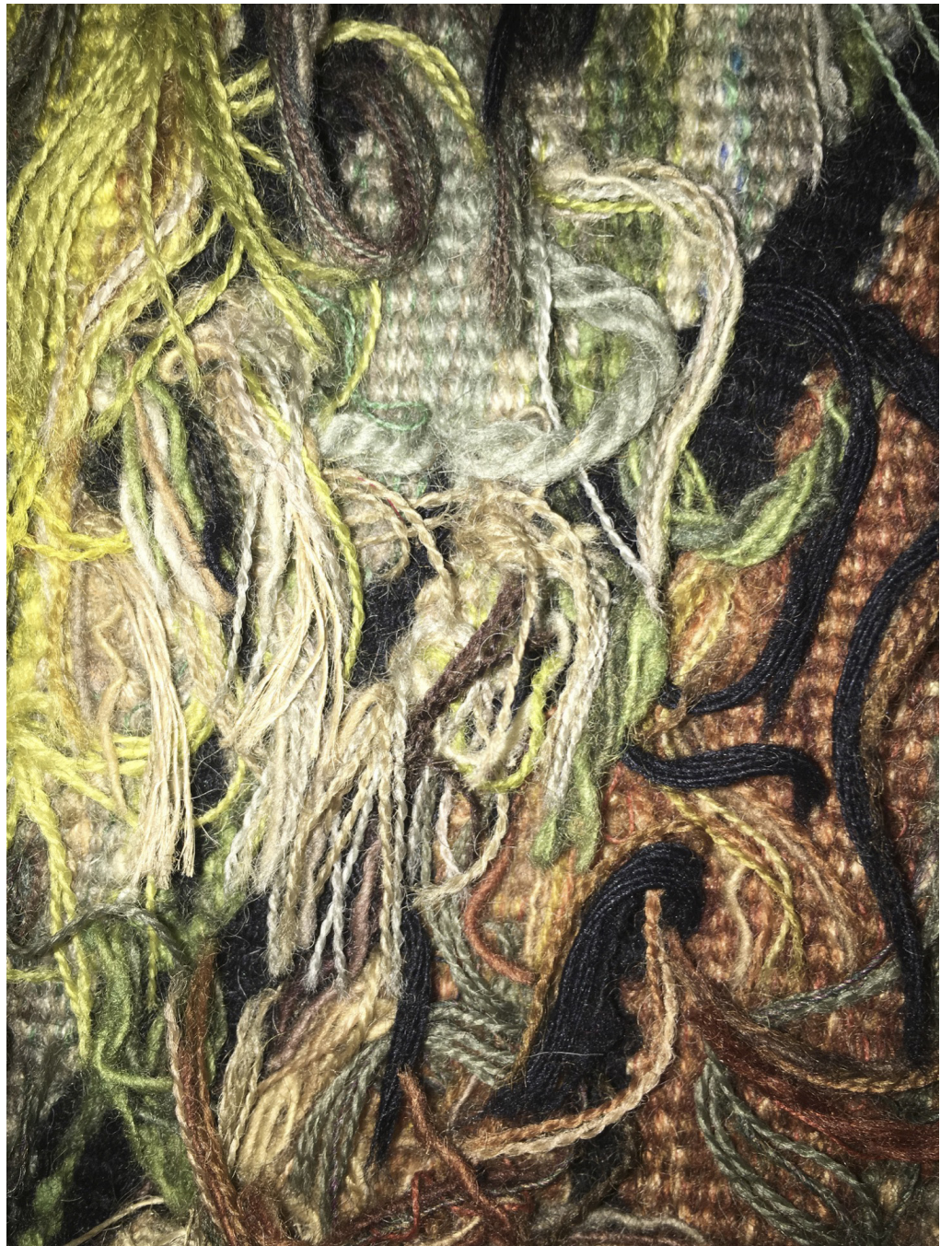


FIGURE **N° 7**



*Le Long Voyage*, Detail at beginning.



FIGURE **N° 8**



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*Le Long Voyage*, Detail at end.

Denmark and represented a project in which he could make a statement about the relation between art and architecture. It was, therefore, very important to him. Negotiations with the architects and the lack of regular payment from the ministry delayed the start of the project. When the commission was finally issued, the timeframe according to which Jorn agreed to finish was very tight. Moreover, it was not in his nature to endure the long,

slow and often tiring process of weaving. 'As he was the one to be always on the road, he relied on my persistence and stability in executing a work of this kind', Wemaëre (cited by Sørensenand & Yde 1996:38) indicated in a retrospective description of their collaboration. Given these circumstances, it was obvious that the two men could not accomplish the task on their own. That led to them giving up the claim that creation and execution should be done by the artist. The new agenda was now to prove that anybody, regardless of any prior training or specialisation, could do such a weaving. Thus, instead of hiring artisans or professional weavers, laypeople were employed.

Around the same time Jorn and Wemaëre conceived *Le Long Voyage*, Le Corbusier was producing large-scale weavings for the building of the High Court in Chandigarh. The latter represented the materialisation of the architect's utopian design of a modern city. In post-World War II French culture, woollen tapestry played an important role. It was promoted by artists, architects and politicians such as Léger, Le Corbusier and André Bloc, amongst others, as a corrective in modern architecture, because the latter was rejected by the broad mass of people who conceived of it as cold, inhuman and technocratic. Given the warmth and softness of the tapestry's material character, architects and politicians hoped for its capacity to recreate the lost connection between abstract art, modern architecture and society.<sup>5</sup> As noted above, this is why Le Corbusier took an interest in the medium of tapestry. While the architect saw himself as the *maître d'oeuvre* in the artistic process, Jorn rather conceived of himself as a catalyst for stimulating laypeople to be creative. *Le Long Voyage* was one of the many efforts in which Jorn tried to exemplify his point. Le Corbusier had made a design for his tapestries, which was then transformed into cartoons to be used as templates by the weavers in India, who would finally produce the work. Jorn and Wemaëre aimed at revolutionising the production process of tapestry making, as they were highly critical of such a mode of fabrication that is based on hierarchy and a division of labour. Instead, Jorn and Wemaëre's goal was to reach out to a mass audience and develop creative models of collective creative production resisting spectacular individualism. This certainly owes much to Jorn's belief that anybody, regardless of any prior education or specialisation, is capable of making art (Jorn 1958:46-48; 101). Apart from the practical reasons which might have contributed to the engagement of laypeople, Jorn and Wemaëre simply had no money to formally hire anybody.

At first, Wemaëre brought in Paola Faimali, a young Italian woman. Both had known her from an exhibition in Dijon in 1957, where the artists participated with their works and the young woman demonstrated how to weave to visitors (Archive Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, Jorn: 15.09.1957). She was not a professional weaver, but a music student with about three to four years' experience in weaving. Faimali started out in a small atelier Wemaëre had provided for her in Paris, and as some of the historical photographs reveal, part of

the weaving also happened in open air (Figures 9, 10). Given the fact that now there was a client on the one end and weavers on the other, the concept of developing the tapestry in a purely spontaneous manner had to be compromised, as ideas and intentions had to be communicated and approved. Both artists created a collage of one of their earlier works and made a drawing on translucent paper. To obtain control of the composition, two ink drawings were developed. Based on this, a pencil and gouache sketch was made, which Jorn took to Denmark to present to Kunstfonden, who financed the project (Figure 11). After this sketch, a 1:5 scale oil painting was made to serve as their model (Figure 12). They started out painting collaboratively and then each took the painting to his atelier and continued working on it individually. Once the oil painting was finished, it was photographed in black and white and enlarged to the tapestry's actual size (14 m x 1.8 m). Weaving started in May 1959 with a mirror image of the photograph placed under the loom.<sup>6</sup>

The tapestry was supposed to be finished in only 18 months, but it soon became clear that it was impossible for anyone to finish a tapestry of this dimension in such a short period of time. The only way to accomplish this goal was to increase the production speed, which is revealed in the decrease of threads, visible on the back. Looking at the tapestry from the front, one can see some bulges on the otherwise flat surface (Figures 13, 14, 15). Moreover, how come the piece varies about 10-15 cm in width? In addition, while the mesh of lines in the tapestry to a large extent corresponds precisely to the ones from the sketch, there is more difference in the colours. To the left, where the weaving started, colours are more blurred and shaded, which results from the composition of the threads in various materials and/or colours. How can these inaccuracies be explained?

According to Inge Bjørn, the process imposed by Jorn and Wemaëre left room for interpretation, which put the weavers in a situation where they either did not know how to go about it or even executed the work differently than expected. Usually, it was then up to Wemaëre to decide whether or not these misunderstandings would remain or needed to be corrected. Bjørn recalls that this continuous need for clarification made the work interesting for them (Sørensen & Yde 1996:38). During the process of development, it was Wemaëre's responsibility to provide the material, and he oversaw the weaving by inspecting the work at the atelier every other day. He experimented in producing the threads from heterogeneous textures, materials and dyes. Jorn was busy with other works, which compelled him to travel often and thus only showed up occasionally when important decisions had to be made. As it was obvious that Faimali could never realise the weaving on her own; an entire team of weavers had to be assembled to support her.



FIGURE **N° 9**



Jorn, Faimali, Wemaëre, Paris, 1959.



FIGURE **N° 10**



Jorn, Faimali, Wemaëre, Paris, 1959.





FIGURE **N° 11**



Jorn with sketches for *Le Long Voyage*, 1959.



FIGURE **N° 12**



Jorn and Wemaere, oil painting sketch, *Le Long Voyage*, 1959.



FIGURE **N° 13**



*Le Long Voyage, Detail.*



FIGURE **N° 14**



*Le Long Voyage, Detail.*



FIGURE **N° 15**



*Le Long Voyage, Detail.*

The Belgian artist Yvette Cauquil Prince also took an interest in the project. She became part of the group and offered to continue the work in her studio in Rue St. Denis. In Yvette Prince they found a perfect ally for their endeavour, because she wanted to do something similar to Marie Cuttoli. And yet, the intention was to give ordinary people the opportunity to do in textile with thread what they can do in drawing, and have them bring everything they understood into play (Bjørn 1984:99). In addition, Gilbert Heck from Alsace, who was a soldier during the war with Algeria, and Michelle Vanderschrijven, a Belgian artist, joined the project. 'He was unbelievable. A natural talent, hardworking. It was a total explosion. It almost turned into a problem, because they had to respect each other a lot' is how one of the weavers described Gilbert Heck's efforts when it came to finishing the piece (Bjørn 1984:100). When two thirds were finished, Jorn brought in Bjørn, who was a needlework teacher, to support the team. He had got to know her through his friend, the ceramicist Erik Nyholm, with whom she taught at *Askov Højskole* in Denmark.<sup>7</sup> None of them had any formal training in weaving but knew well how to compensate for their lack of professionalism with enthusiasm and engagement.

## Intentional Inconsistencies

One evening, Bjørn was sent to Jorn's Parisian family home with a mission. As she recalls retrospectively, weavers had worked under an enormous time pressure in order to meet the contract obligations the artists had towards the government. During this process of fast, collaborative development, the tapestry obviously showed bulges owing to the fact that one of them had worked at high speed, and it was now up to the artist to decide how to solve this problem. When she arrived at the apartment of the Jorn family, she encountered the artist and his wife, Matie, just about to go out for dinner. They wanted to celebrate the fact that Jorn had sold one of his paintings. The atmosphere was exhilarated and gay, as the couple had not gone out for 12 years owing to financial restraints. Matie had even bought a fur coat from the money of the sale, but forgot to buy stockings, so Bjørn was asked to lend her stockings to Matie. In the end, Bjørn was not able to accomplish the mission on which she had been sent but was instead given the task of babysitting the couple's four young children. As this example shows, Jorn's spontaneous recruitment was not restricted to finding weavers, but encompassed all aspects of human life.

When Jorn came to the atelier later to inspect the artwork, he crawled under the loom and asked the team to roll out the tapestry. Surprisingly, he was not concerned about the bulges. On the contrary, he liked them! Nor did he mind the inaccuracies in the width of the piece. He regarded these as traces of the human hand that had created the work, and that – in his opinion – was certainly not to be erased. Most obviously, he preferred authentic human expression to the perfection that machine production could achieve. What seems to be a minor detail of an artist's personal preference thus opens up a larger field of discourse, namely, the value of the irregularity and imperfection of a hand-crafted work in contrast to the flawlessness and impersonality of something that is industrially produced (Bjørn 1984:100).

With *Le Long Voyage* at Aarhus Statsgymnasium, Jorn and Wemaëre wanted to draw specific attention to the relationship between art and architecture. Their work was not just about artistic decoration in a building, but rather about making a plea for atavistic crafts such as ceramics and weaving. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper in *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Ästhetik* (1860) had stressed the importance of textiles as an "ur-art" in the development of the architectural form through cladding. In opposition to that, at the turn of the twentieth century, most modern architects had banned textiles from architecture, as they conceived of it as part of the decorative arts, which was of no obvious purpose or use for them. Even worse, textiles in the forms of covers or curtains, for example, were conceived as a means of concealment, and

therefore contradictory to most modern architects' claim that form had to follow function. If there was any room for textiles as a material, the focus lied on serial production rather than authentic artistic expression. This shift is best illustrated in the work from the Bauhaus weaving studio. While examples from the early period in Weimar, under the guidance of Johannes Itten, were unique, expressive hand-crafted works, often experimenting with the characteristics of the material, those coming out of the Dessau weaving studio focused on serial machine production of fabrics by the metre to be implemented in standardised production.

This shift from unique manual fabrication on a loom towards serial automated machine production is precisely what Jorn would criticise only a couple of years after finishing *Le Long Voyage* in his text 'The Loom ... Toy of the artist', written for the catalogue of a tapestry exhibition.

After the tradition of so many centuries and the slow development of art and expression, the period in-between the wars seem to be characteristic of the admiration artists and intellectuals had developed for the machines and technologies of their time ... Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier, they have all worshiped this new form of being and seeing, which declares war on handcraft as an artistic and practical means of production. But man will always remain the living and invigorating center of all techniques he conceives: no machine can reduce the importance of the hand or the most primitive tools it makes use of without reducing the importance of the human being at the same time. (Jorn [1957] 1981:44).

During the second half of the 1950s, industrially produced goods, mainly coming from the US, were flooding the European market, and the world of the arts had turned towards mechanised media, such as photography and film, audio and video, and offset printing. Just a few years before work on *Le long voyage* started, Jorn had got into an argument with the Swiss artist and designer Max Bill. Bill was then the founding director of the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm, a new design school which was officially acclaimed by Walter Gropius as a post-war Bauhaus. Underlying their dispute was their different understanding of the value of industrial production in relation to artistic imagination. While Bill saw machine production and automation as a goal in itself to be supported by the artist in his or her creation, Jorn understood the former to be an asset to inform and serve the artistic creation, and not the other way around. In his essay "The Situationists and Automation" (1958), Jorn ([1958] 2012:134) writes: 'If scientists and the technicians claim automation is a new means of liberating the human race, this should imply a transcendence of previous human activities. This obliges the active human imagination to outshine the very realization of automation'.

## Nordic Democracy versus French Hegemony in the Arts

The renaissance of French tapestry, which started in the second half of the 1930s, continued after World War II, fuelled by the efforts of Jean Cassou, French art critic and founding director of the *Musée National d'Art Moderne* in Paris. And yet, after World War II, the situation was completely different. Given the medium's popular character, it had been used for propaganda by the dictatorships of the recent past and therefore had a dubious reputation. Consequently, Cassou's 1946 tapestry exhibition strongly focused on Lurçat's work since it came out of Aubusson, which, of the three major French tapestry manufacturers, was the only one that did not produce work for the Vichy government. And yet, once again, Cassou advocated for weaving in the debate about reconstructing the "Grand Nation" and described tapestry as a medium to promote 'the best traditional French qualities: good taste, clear reason, practical adaption to reality, contempt for pomp, [and] a certain rigorous and Jacobin classicism' (Cassou [1957] 2000:114). Such a claim for a cultural hegemony had challenged Jorn who, with his Corbra group, right after World War II, had aimed at providing decentralised Nordic alternatives to the aspiration of supremacy in post-war French culture. Jorn and Wemaëre in their weavings made no references to any heraldic or medieval traditions, but instead took their inspiration from folk traditions in weaving, from Norway, Peru and Tunisia. With *Le Long Voyage* they opposed claims of cultural supremacy. Rather, they wanted to set an example showing that everyone can engage in the creative process, regardless of national, institutional and professional boundaries.

How did this intercultural team of amateur weavers function in practical terms? An interesting detail Bjørn repeatedly stresses is the fact that the team was unable to communicate in words, as they could not speak each other's languages. They also conceived of colour differently, and the finetuning of this happened not by speaking, but by the act of weaving itself. Her description stresses the artists' claim to develop a tapestry which was the result of the material performance and the process of fabrication, rather than of a specific preconceived concept. When comparing the tapestry with the sketch according to which it was woven (Figure 16), it is nonetheless striking how well the transition from one medium to another is carried out. In the sketch, there are different grades of black lines. Some are very decisive and strong, where the line has the same deep tone of black over its entire surface. Others give a less strong, more ephemeral impression, owing to the fact that they have been applied faster and the surface of the line consists of a number of thinner, partially interrupted lines. Others seem to bleed out, so that it does not create an all-black surface. This effect is achieved by the weavers weaving a stippled line with a different thread of a different colour or material, which creates a less saturated colour effect. The weavers used the yarn Wemaëre had produced



FIGURE **N° 16**



*Le Long Voyage*, weaving and sketch. Photo: Lars Bay.

according to the kind of effect they wanted to achieve. He received cheap leftovers of yarn from Rodier and at the same time, in order to get a certain colour nuance, several shades of coloured tread were spun together to obtain a specific effect. According to Bjørn, Wemaëre also taught her about the different ways light is reflected depending on whether it is oil paint or wool, which in turn has an effect on how the colour comes out. As she explains, 'The threads come up as dots and create more colour. If you press it tightly together, the effect you get is depth, but not colour. Oil paint reflects directly, but this is not the case with yarn. Yarn swallows the light, more than cold and warm' (Bjørn 1984:99) (Figures 17, 18).

## Questions of Authorship and Accreditation

Just before it was sent to Denmark, the completed tapestry was exhibited in Galerie des Quatres Saisons in Paris. For this occasion, Jorn had prepared a small publication which featured the 21 weavings he and Wemaëre had created over the years, together with two texts, one by his colleague from the Situationist International, Michelle Bernstein, and the other by Gaston Bachelard. The philosopher's health was fragile, and he was



FIGURE **N° 17**



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*Le Long Voyage, detail.*



FIGURE **N° 18**



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*Le Long Voyage, detail.*



therefore unable to come to the studio to see *Le Long Voyage*. But he still agreed to write a short text about it, in which he declares,

A master of weaving often uses all his creativity to draw a template. In advance, he determines the variety of the threads. Subsequently, diligent craftspeople translate this into the beautiful language of yarn. Hereby, there is a break between the value of the creation and its elaboration. Asger Jorn and Pierre Wemaëre have unified their creative forces in all states of development, by being both the creative weavers and the elaborating weavers of this tapestry ... (Bachelard 1960:sp).

Most obviously, Bachelard was blind to the fact that Jorn and Wemaëre also had to compromise their ideals in order to create this tapestry. And yet, the philosopher's statement, in combination with the fact that the work was signed J/W, makes us believe that it was the two men *only* who created it. Was it not precisely this cult around the artist and the artist's work – fuelled by the fact that the author signs an art piece – that Jorn wanted to fight, and to instead empower everybody to take on creative activity?

Looking carefully at the signature, we see that most of Wemaëre's name is written with light letters on a dark background and is therefore clearly legible, whereas Jorn's name is in bright letters on a rather bright background and therefore more difficult to decipher (Figure 19). What does this tell us? Is it a way to communicate their respective engagement in the project? Is it about Jorn's reservation to claim authorship for something accomplished by many people? It is known that Jorn seldomly titled his paintings and very often did so only upon request of his art dealers, who argued that paintings with a title sell better than the ones without. Perhaps once again here, it was the pressure of the client who demanded a signed piece from the artists, rather than the group of people who created it, that made him sign in such a way.

Most obviously, all of those who collaborated on *Le Long Voyage* did not stand on an equal footing. During the process of production, Jorn, who appeared only occasionally, had the last word when it came to certain decisions about the execution of the work. Bjørn retrospectively stated that Wemaëre came every other day and the project would not have worked without his 'supervision' (Sørensen & Yde 1996:40). Her use of the word 'supervision' implies that – just as in the weavings from the artists around Cuttoli – it was practically unavoidable to distinguish between the artists who designed and made the decisions and the ones who followed and executed the piece. Weavers had to endure rather extreme working conditions, no payment, spontaneous babysitting, and so forth, while being overworked owing to the almost impossibly tight deadline Jorn had agreed to. The signature perhaps represents his struggle between holding on to the original idea of producing a 25 square metre tapestry in a spontaneous, affective and improvised manner himself and the desperate recruiting of weavers – one man and three women



FIGURE **Nº 19**



*Le Long Voyage*, signature.

– which was absolutely necessary to accomplish his ambitious task on time. Moreover, in order to participate in the weaving, Bjørn, for example, had to take unpaid leave of absence from her teaching job. And when she asked Jorn about payment, he told her not to worry and assured her that this problem would resolve itself, as he expected some extra funding to come in. In the end though, this unfortunately did not happen, and nobody involved in this ambitious project earned any money from the work invested. Among the many stories *Le Long Voyage* tells, this one certainly reveals some of the underlying gender politics which made this magnificent tapestry come into being.

## Notes

1. The Danish Cobra are an experimental *avant-garde* group of artists, poets, architects and writers, from Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Brussels, 1948-1951. Its members included, amongst others, Karel Appel, Constant, Christian Dotremont, Lucebert, Asger Jorn.
2. The Situationist International was a decentralised, left winged experimental *avant-garde* group of philosophers, writers, artists and architects, founded in 1957 by, amongst others, Asger Jorn, Guy Debord and Michelle Bernstein.

3. Le Corbusier, born Pierre Edouard Jeanneret, 1898-1965, was a Swiss French architect who was influential in the development of Modern Architecture worldwide.
4. Cartoons are 1:1 templates that are laid directly underneath the loom according to which the weavings are executed.
5. This refers to the criticism of modern architecture within the discourse of a *Synthesis of the arts in France, ca. mid 1940ies – early 1960ies*, which was calling for artistic collaborations within the efforts of a French reconstruction after World War II.
6. The procedure is recalled by Inge Bjørn, who later joined as a weaver. When talking about collaging an earlier work, she most certainly refers to *Bird in the Forest* (see Sørensen & Yde 1996:38).
7. In this context it is important to remember that 'Højskole' in Denmark is a network of educational institutions that offers courses to adults while disregarding any prior training. It was founded by the priest and writer N.F.S. Grundvig in 1844 aiming at a democratisation of education.

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