

## INVESTIGATIONS INTO 20TH-CENTURY PAINTING MATERIALS: USING STUDIO STUDIES AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY TO RECREATE MATERIAL PRACTICES

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will discuss how an artist's material practices and working locations are the pieces of information that can tie together the research findings on paint archives, reference collections and individual artworks. For conservators, historical sources can identify relevant information such as paint brands, tools and artists' additions from documentation of the artist studio. A few reoccurring dilemmas surface when using photography, film and archive material to recreate fragments of an artist's material practices as occasional performative aspects can be interwoven in images from the 20th-century. In the mass of genres, and interpretations, from private archives to mass entertainment, a few simplified labels to categorise or generalise photograph and film material can be a guide to help identify when caution might be of particular importance and context information would therefore be needed for the interpretation. This paper will suggest three categories as a working aid for the studies of artist studios and material practices in the 20th-century, through a few examples from the two artists Asger Jorn and Karel Appel: the private scene, the invited glimpse, and the purposely framed situation of artistic output.*

**Keywords:** *Material practices; Archival research; Artists' studios; Asger Jorn; Karel Appel; Methodology; Modern art*

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### **Introduction**

Documenting the material practices of an artist, like paint brands, working tools and application techniques, can be source material for art historians [1, 2], conservators and conservation scientists. Several research initiatives over the last decades have discussed paint formula variations in relation to condition issues such as efflorescence, cracking, softening and solvent sensitivity [3]. The making of historically relevant mock up paints for conservation research can aid in testing both art technology and treatment issues. Still, when many artists' material practices and most historic paint brands are undocumented more detailed research is needed to gain an understanding of the material variations across individual careers. Photographs and films are arguably important sources of information for conservators aiming to piece together the past working habits of an artist. While a necessary scepticism to quotes and the memory of both artists and interview objects are thoroughly discussed in both art history and conservation literature, the active use of photography and film is less addressed as source material for research, particularly in the field of conservation. The image of the artist at work can bring a closeness to the working process, but it is necessary to consider why the photograph or film was taken. For the purpose of discussing some of the nuances of images of mid-20th-

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century artists, this paper will use examples and consider if the archive material could potentially be one of the three broad categories: (i) through the keyhole, (ii) the invited glimpse, or (iii) an artistic output framed for our purpose.

That artists can be active participants and influence the documentation of their own careers is obvious. Still, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century some artists go much further. In certain examples this participation resembles some degree of artistic output, even in extremes situation turning the act of documentation into a performance or even entertainment.

Archival sources like photographs and film of the artist in the studio can supplement the information conservators get from their primary sources, the artworks themselves. Reference collections from an artist's estate represent the material choices of an artist at a given time, but also what has been left behind and perhaps not used. Archival sources can be of great importance in pinpointing the likelihood of relevance of a reference collection to a potential unique time period in an artist's oeuvre. A famous example of bringing the artist away from the habits and location of the real working situation is Hans Namuths filming of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), as has been pointed out by *Caroline A. Jones* [4]. Filming Pollock painting through glass and outside created a semi-realistic working situation that should be accounted for when discussing this and similar sources. The images of Pollock painting did become instrumental in shaping the public image of his persona. The fascination of the artist in the studio did create a surge in both images and films for public consumption at this point. In certain cases, the photographer aims to portray the artist, sometimes, there has been a collaboration between them, and again, there are examples of the artist taking charge. The act of painting or displaying the working artist could take on a directly performative aspect in the 1900s. Examples of painters that painted with performative techniques are Yves Klein and George Mathieu. Therefore, the interactions between artist and photographer, journalists or directors also varies greatly. Using the images of the artist for research purposes in conservation, it is therefore important to ask what kind of documentation are we looking at? What is known about the images, how were they used, why were they taken, and do they represent the real working conditions of the artist or not?

### ***Archival sources to material practices in modern art***

#### ***Background***

To discuss the impact of contextual information for interpretation of photograph and film this paper uses some examples of photographs and movies still from the generation of artists that made their career breakthroughs in the early 1950s. Assessing the working studios and their locations is a beneficial context when interpreting an artist's material practices [5]. Questions that can in part be answered from earlier research are: did they bring materials with them when travelling? Did they buy materials locally? What paint brands were available at the time and place? Only fragmented answers or clues will be possible to recreate looking back, but for many, even acclaimed artists, their material practices and working habits have not been examined, and is at this point, a tabula rasa. This paper will look closer at images of the material practices of Asger Jorn (1914-1973) and Karel Appel (1923-2006). Asger Jorn was born in Denmark. He studied and worked in Paris both before and after the second World War. Karel Appel was born in the Netherlands and started an increasingly international career when moving to Paris in 1950.

The location where an artist worked at a given time probably will influence what materials were available. A few brands were sold internationally, but until increased competition and larger mergers in the latter half of the 20th-century there were still a large number of local paint manufacturers in Europe [5]. Because of this it is worth having an overview of the main working locations. Through studying the artist studios, it is possible to organise the information in production periods. Archival material can in combination with possible production periods enable the examination of what practices might be anomalies or a

general trend for a larger part of an artist's oeuvre [5]. From the earlier research on the two painters, it has been suggested that their use of materials is key to the condition issues in their paintings [6-9].

#### ***Earlier research***

100 years after the first photographs of artists in the studio, in the mid-20th-century there is a distinct increase in demand for such images for magazines like *Life* and *Vogue* [8]. When attempting to recreate the material practices of artists, the focus is in particular set on the production side of the domains of operations [10]. Valuable details from a wider length of an artist's career can through secondary sources available from the domains of distribution, reception and context enrich our understanding of artistic practices.

While the camera technically records the reality, images still need to be interpreted from their context considering the images as visual culture [11]. The theoretical art history perspectives are discussed in the *Lure of the Biographical* from 2017 for the purpose of interpreting images of artists working in the 20th-century [8]. By addressing the dynamics between the artist's, themselves and the photographers and filmmakers, art historian Kister points to the aspects of (self) representation within the documentation of an artist. Although it might be unknown what the real dynamics behind a photograph might have been in hindsight, it is of importance to consider. When images become a source for research into the artist's life and work, Kister highlights the importance of asking if the artist in part manipulates or sensors how they are represented to take control of his or her public image.

Questions that might be relevant to ask are if the photograph is a family or private setting or an unaware moment. Are the images meant for public view? What can be known about the setting and purpose of the images?

Art historians such as A.S. *Lehmann* [1], who search for the creative practises behind the making of an artwork, highlight the benefit of photographic images as one of several categories of source material. *Lehmann* further elaborates on the dilemmas in interpreting photographs or film as source material by pointing to the artist's conscious act of hiding and showing parts of the making [2]. These and other perspectives from both art history and media studies can be useful when studying archival material for the purpose of research in the field of conservation.

#### ***Karel Appel's material practices***

Karel Appel travelled extensively throughout his career and had studios over longer periods in several countries [5]. This makes it relevant to look in more detail at what materials he used at the different locations.

In the 20th-century images of the artist in the studio turns mainstream. The act of painting is captured both on film for both cinema and TV. As mentioned above it was especially after 1951 with *Namuth and Falkenbergs* film on Jackson Pollock that there was a surge of interest. A film that could be said to be part of the second-generation artist movie is *The Reality of Karel Appel* made by Jan Vrijman in 1961, which in P. Hayward's words was a result of the public obsession with the act of painting:

'The extreme 'fetishization' of the *actual moment* of creation has resulted in the production of film texts which, in attempting to record this moment in as direct a manner as possible, have merely served to highlight the shortcomings and contradictions of both their specific projects and the broad approach in general' [12, page 8-9]. Hayward concludes that Jan Vrijman's film *The reality of Appel* from 1961, cannot be viewed as documenting the actual working situation. It is fair to state that this film has strong leanings toward the performative. Although Hayward does not discuss what the performative motivation of Appel and Vrijman could have been, neither does he relate the observations to be made from the film to the actual artworks by Appel from the same time frame. As art historian *Lehmann* points out in her texts about sculpting with clay, a film can show some of the body movements that otherwise can be difficult to explain or deduct from the objects or by the written word, and while *The reality of*

*Appel* might be a construction, there is arguably a lot of information in the material as long as the context of the situation is taken into account.

*Appel* did control who had access to the location while filming, and one of these was his friend Ed van der Elsken. Van der Elsken took many images while in Baarn, among them one that shows Karel Appel with an Old Holland tube in his hand (Fig. 1). The photo points to *Appel* using Old Holland when the photograph was taken in Baarn, but we have to ask how representative this one moment is for *Appel*'s career in general.



**Fig. 1.** Detail of Karel Appel while working in Baarn, 1961.  
Photo: Nederlands Fotomuseum / © Ed van der Elsken

Old Holland is a Dutch brand, so it is natural to look at other images from the time *Appel* worked in the Netherlands for clues. One of the best-known photographs was taken at what was *Appel*'s second main studio in Amsterdam and the first from after World War II: Huize Smyrna. In the photograph, Karel Appel looks directly at the photographer inviting us into his studio. There is no sign of pretence or performative aspects – but an artist presented to the public. The photographer is opening a window into the actual studio, but the situation is posed. The studio in Huize Smyrna was a real, working studio localised in between the two paint shops, van Beek and Vettewinkel, which *Appel* has stated he used while working in Amsterdam [13]. By zooming in and turning the image upside down, the shape of the Rembrandt logo from Talens can be identified (Figs. 2 and 3).

*Appel* did recall buying Talens from the van Beek shop [13] but it is unknown what other brands they would have in stock in the 1940s. A third shop, Van Linden, is known to have sold Old Holland back in 1909 (Fig. 4) [14]. However, it is so far unknown if *Appel* frequented this shop or used the Old Holland brand while still in the Netherlands. It is clearly a possibility as it must have been readily available in Amsterdam, although no trace of Old Holland paint has been found in any sources from this timeframe while he was working in the Netherlands [5].



**Fig. 2.** Appel in his studio in 'Huize Smyrna' c. 1947.  
Photo: © Dirk de Herder/Nederlands fotomuseum



**Fig. 3.** Detail from paint boxes on the table in Appel's studio shown in figure. 2 and turned 180 degrees (left)  
A schematic illustration of the Rembrandt logo from Talens (right)

Appel moved, as noted, to Paris in 1950, and France remained his main working location for the next two decades. When Appel agreed to make a feature film with Jan Vrijman, the practical circumstances surrounding the production are of great importance to the interpretation of the images. These were:

(i) Appel's studio in Paris, which was too small for the type of production Vrijman wanted to do, he is finding a filming location in the Netherlands at Groeneveld Castle in Baarn.

(ii) Appel did not have a working studio for easel paintings in the Netherlands at that time, but worked in Paris, New York and Nice.

Vrijman has repeatedly claimed in several sources that he purchased the paint needed for the filming [5].

In earlier research on condition issues related to Karel Appel's artworks, mock-ups were made using the brands available in the Netherlands: Old Holland, Royal Talens and Winsor & Newton [15]. Setting aside the complications of the potential changes of formulas, what can be said about the historical relevance of these brands to Appel's material practices across his career? Talens could be identified to Appel's early years in Amsterdam (Fig. 2). Photographs

and movie stills show Appel working with Old Holland in Baarn in 1961 (Fig. 1). Since Vrijman purchased the paint for the shooting of *the Reality of Karel Appel*, how much did it impact his material choices that the location was in the Netherlands? And how does this compare to the day-to-day working situation of Appel in Paris at the time? The removal of the artist from the original working location does require a comparison to other sources to conclude how relevant the images of the constructed situation could be to reality.



**Fig. 4.** Advertisement from a newspaper on Old Holland paint being sold in van der Linde in Rozengracht 35 in 1909

Other stills from the same movie show both logos from Talens and Adam Montparnasse (Fig. 5). Adam Montparnasse, a shop that, according to the paint maker Edouard Adam sold paint to Appel over at least two decades in Paris, is featured at the very beginning of Vrijman's film. That there was paint from Talens at Baarn has been discussed earlier as tins of ETA were clearly visible on one of the tables in the location studio [15]. But it has not been pointed out that the brand-new paint line Van Gogh from Talens is visible on the working table palette next to the easel (Fig. 5) [5]. The packing material behind the easel to the right in the room, visible in a photo by Ed van der Elsken, also confirms the amount of several different paint tubes. One box type in a brown packing, and another that from the logo shape and colour is likely the Van Gogh student paint from Talens. Most of the paints are Dutch, but it is an anomaly that Appel is working on easel paintings in the Netherlands as his main working location since 1950 had been Paris. That Vrijman would get Dutch paint would be practical as this was readily available nearby this location.

Baarn does, therefore, arguably represent an anomaly in Appel's use of materials when a few weeks of artistic production resulted in 13 paintings. But his main working location was in France. Evidence from archival and historical sources show that Appel used Vettewinkel and Talens before and after he left for Paris, but Old Holland has, after searching through a wide array of different images from the working studios, not been positively identified in any of them. It is not known if there was already a distribution of the brand outside of the Netherlands. Talens, on the other hand, had already had distribution abroad for quite some time. From other archival photographs of the studios of Pierre Soulages and Hans Hartung it seems quite certain that Talens was available in Paris in the 1950s [5].

If the context of the film was not known, the production in Baarn does display many signs of an intentional artistic output, together with the quotes and Appel's introduction in the movie all hints that this is not just a documentary. In photos, film and books, Appel collaborated at this time on how his art was presented and projected. Appel spills over into many genres taking control of his public as well as his artistic image. He composed music, and co-authored several books, some of which are interesting hybrids of interviews, statements, and images. From descriptions, it was tightly controlled which journalists or photographers had access to the location at Baarn. Appel is seemingly active in collaboration but also in control.



**Fig. 5.** Close up on Appels table palette next to the easel in Baarn, 1961. Paint tubes from Talens at the upper left and jar of medium from Adam to the upper right. Photo: Vrijman 1962/ Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid

It could be argued that part of the remaining public image from this time often referred to Appel as the raging bull, that the images of him are interpreted to project an image of the masculine, artistic force and genius. One of the photographs from Baarn taken by Ed van der Elsken is an example of Appel being both playful and suggestive for the camera (Fig. 6). An example of a framed view that Appel has participated in creating, with several already attempted lines from paint tubes on the table showing it was made several attempts to get the right shot.

Since Baarn was a movie location, the images taken here need to be discussed critically in relation to images from the actual studios. Photographs from Appel's studio at that particular time at rue Brezin 7 have been photographed by Cor Dekkinga and Daniel Frasnay. The Lefranc logo can be identified from one of the images by Dekkinga now at the RKD archive. The photo taken from inside rue Brezin 7 in 1962 also displays a blurry paint tube logo that might be Old Holland (Fig. 7A and 7B).<sup>1</sup>

The shape in the photo does indicate the logo of Old Holland (Fig. 7A and B). This photo is taken in a relatively short time after Baarn, and Appel could have brought the left-over paint back with him in his big white rolls Royce, so it does not necessarily point to the likelihood of him using the brand on a regular basis. Another series of photographs by Daniel Frasnay from Appel's studio in Colombes show van Gogh student paints [5].

The château in Colombes, which was turned into several studios, was purchased in 1964, and Appel worked here between 1965 and 1972. It is, therefore, from the repeated identification more strongly an indication of a preference. It is likely that Appel appreciated the Van Gogh paint, either for its colours, texture or perhaps the lower price since this was a student line. The

<sup>1</sup> A vintage print of the photo is currently at the RKD archive in Haag. The original has not been possible to locate.

photographs taken at Appel's working studios have less traces of any performative aspects. They connect the paint brands of Lefranc, Adam and Talens to the practices of the artist himself on several occasions.



**Fig. 6.** Karel Appel on location in Baarn in 1961.  
Photo: Nederlands Fotomuseum/© Ed van der Elsken

Therefore, Baarn is important as this is likely the first time, he used the van Gogh paint. But it is less likely that he continued using Old Holland as this has not been identified or suggested from sources from Paris or France after 1962. In comparison, photographs showing Winsor & Newton brand have been identified among the series taken in New York in the 1980s by *Roland Hagenberg* [16]. Winsor and Newton have not been identified so far in photographs from the French or Dutch working studios. It is therefore possible from the paint brands used for mock ups to divide them into periods where they are more relevant: Royal Talens in both Amsterdam, Baarn and Paris, Old holland at Baarn in 1961 and possibly a short time into 1962 in Paris, and Winsor & Newton to New York in the 1980s. These fragments are not in any way the full story, but from the archival material more of the personal preferences of Karel Appel is pinpointed with a stronger likelihood of particular brands to a time and studio location.

#### **Asger Jorn's material practices**

Asger Jorn worked also at several different locations and countries across his career. Many of which has been documented in several playful moments, both in posed situations and private glimpses. But the photographs of him do from what has been reviewed not show the



same leaning over into the performative that can be read from several of the images of Karel Appel. The artist in the studio was as mentioned an important promotion tool and popular in the media. For the interpretation of photographs, it depends on if it is plausible what we see could be a realistic working situation, or perhaps a posed glimpse that looks wonderful in the papers. An example of such a posed situation can be seen in a photograph taken by Gunni Busck in 1957. If the photo was singularly used as pure documentation, it could potentially be interpreted from this that Jorn left his paintings out in the open – as the painting is placed where there is a hole in the roof (Fig. 8). Jorn worked outdoors on larger formats at times [5].



**Fig. 7.** A: Drawing of paint tube logo in a printed photograph taken by Cor Dekkinga in rue Brezin 7 in 1962;  
 B: Old Holland tube, with a secondary cap from Asger Jorn's last studio in France

But this particular photograph has the characteristics of a posed situation. It might even be said to emphasise the austere simplicity and roughness of Jorn's accommodation and working situation at that time and place. Jorn had no reason to hide the bare simplicity of his working conditions from a political and personal standpoint. Jorn would, throughout his career, discuss communism, at one point posing in a clear reference to Karl Marx (1818-1883) and showed several marked oppositions to the established. For example, his refusal to receive the Guggenheim award fits well into this. He lavished money at artistic collective initiatives, but his studios were often in a state of disarray and he did not make any clear attempts to hide this. His working studios do never point to the bourgeois or established, again perhaps unlike Appel in later years. But there is no direct sign that Jorn would leave his paintings exposed to the rain and weather. At the ceramics workshop in Albisola, his paintings had to stay outside due to the many visitors sleeping in his studio space, but the artworks were brought inside during a heavy rainstorm [17].

In the early 1960s, Asger Jorn regularly worked in his studio in Paris on Rue Boulevard 143 [5]. Photographs from the studio were taken by the photographer Ib Hansen before an exhibition in 1961 with Jorn's Luxury paintings (Fig. 9). The Luxury paintings are examples of artworks where the paint have been applied by string, dripped or poured onto the canvas. In the photos, several brands are possible to identify: Ripolin, Sadolin & Holmblad (a Danish paint brand), and AVI (a French house paint) (Fig. 9) [5]. The art historian K. Kurcsynski suggests that the Luxury paintings are in part an ironic comment but also partly an acknowledgement by Jorn to Pollocks drip (poured) paintings [18, 19]. She argues this from Jorn's critical writing around this time, both on the Informel and Situationist International (SI), a group that Jorn had

co-founded. Jorn made the claim that action painting was a self-centred act that did not communicate with the viewer [20].



**Fig. 8.** Jorn in his studio in the new house in Albisola, 1957.  
Photo: Gunni Busck, Museum Jorn Archive

Since using industrial paint, house paint, or decoration brands are clearly shown to have been part of Jorn's material practices over several decades, the motivations and potential implicit references are broader than this one particular situation in 1961 [5]. 1961 was the year the last artists were expelled from the SI. The SI insisted that art was a luxury commodity [20]. Jorn had left the group by himself the year before [21].

The Luxury paintings are artworks that, when looking closer at select examples, these have a particular texture and high surface gloss (Fig. 10). The many tins from several house paints in between regular artist oil paints, like Lefebvre-Foinet, tell us what he had available in his studio during this working session. It is necessary to look at the artworks themselves to connect what type of paint he applied on to the canvas for each individual work. Lefebvre-Foinet artist oil paint would very unlikely result in surfaces like seen in *Allmen* (Common), one of the Luxury paintings. One of the commercial tins like Ripolin or Sadolux is more likely to have been used.

*K. Kurczynski* [18] has suggested that the use of industrial paint and lacquer is part of this ironic comment to Jackson Pollock as he was famed for using various industrial and commercial paints [18]. The material choices of an artist are as Kurczynski suggests, not always coincidental and can be argued to bear meaning or show an artistic preference or even reference. Arguably there are also other potential implications in Jorn's use of these industrial paints. Perhaps Jorn's visit to Picasso in Antibes in 1946, his compositional references in certain motives to Picasso, and their shared communist political standpoint could be relevant since Picasso's use of Ripolin should have been well known at the time in artistic circles. Ripolin paint would have been easily obtained in the Montparnasse area. Ripolin was also left behind in Jorn's studio after his premature death in 1973 [5].



**Fig. 9.** Jorn painting at 143 Boulevard de la Gare, 1961.  
Photo: Ib Hansen, courtesy of Museum Jorn Archive



**Fig. 10.** Detail from *Allmen*, 1961 by Asger Jorn © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.  
One of the paintings suspected to include Ripolin or a similar type of paint

It can therefore be argued that there might be both a material preference over time on Jorn's side and influence from artists in Paris just as well as in America. Another reference that

could be relevant to Jorn's material choices is the Alba conference, Debord, and the above mentioned International Situationists (SI). The exhibition *A cavern of antimatter* in Paris in 1959 was Pinot Galizio's (1902-1964) introduction in Paris and made in collaboration with the SI [22]. The gallery was covered in approximately 145 square meters of Galizio's so-called industrial painting. Some of the issues considered around and among the participants of SI was to use industrial progress and new materials for the purpose of art. Jorn was one of the founding members of the SI and the discussion between the European artistic network can be expected to have been a large part of impulses leading up to material choices for the luxury paintings in 1961. Dripped and poured details in several artworks bear some similarities to more commercial paints such as Ripolin [5]. From the photographic material, more than one observation supports a pattern for the occasional but partial use of more industrial or commercial paint [5]. If there has been any intentional irony in the use of the paint type and application techniques for the luxury paintings, like Kurczynski implies in her text from 2007, the work situation is to a large extent realistic, although the photographic situation might be slightly posed for the photographer. Jorn's hand has a residue of paint colour left under his fingernails after attempting to clean it [5]. Also, the studio is confirmed to have been his regular working studio through other photographs and sources. Leaving aside the meanings of the materials and the application technique what can be said with high certainty is that Jorn had several paint brands and types available in his working studio in 1961, of which some of the paint in the tins made it on to several canvases.

## Conclusions

Although the documentation for the purpose of conservation research focuses on the practical issues at hand, the contextual and art historical perspectives on both the time and the artist has proven to be of importance when using the observations from archival material to create an attempt to piece together the material practices of the two artists Asger Jorn and Karel Appel.



**Fig. 11.** A: Asger Jorn painting at the sanatorium in Silkeborg. Photo: Johannes Jensen/Museum Jorn. B: Jorn in Albisola. Photo: Gunni Busck, Museum Jorn Archive. C: Karel Appel in Baarn. Photo: Ed van der Elsken/Nederlands Fotomuseum/© Ed van der Elsken

Material practices of the artists will be of importance in order to connect the historical relevance of singular observations, being either from a reference collection, an artist's estate or an artwork. In the span of numerous potential categories from the private and almost over to performance art, this paper suggests three simplifications as a working tool for conservators when working with mid-20th-century artists: through the keyhole, the invited glimpse, the framed artistic output (Fig. 11). Not because categorizing the photographs will give any answers – but because it might give a useful clue to when context and art historical background is of particular importance to clarify the documented situation in the context of a wider material practice of an artist.

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